

DEMOCRACY FUND

POST PROJECT EVALUATION



FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

UDF-19-845-UGA: Strengthening Grassroots Women's Groups to Promote and Protect Civic Space in Uganda

Date: 20 July 2023

Table of Contents

- I. OVERALL ASSESSMENT 1**
- II. PROJECT CONTEXT AND STRATEGY 3**
 - (i) Development context 3*
 - (ii) The project objective 4*
 - (iii) Project strategy and approach 4*
- III. METHODOLOGY..... 6**
- IV. EVALUATION FINDINGS 7**
 - (i) Relevance 7*
 - (ii) Coherence..... 9*
 - (iii) Effectiveness 10*
 - (iv) Efficiency 13*
 - (v) Impact 15*
 - (vi) Sustainability..... 16*
 - (vii) UNDEF added value 17*
- V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS..... 18**
- VI. LESSONS LEARNED 19**

- ANNEXES 21**
 - Annex 1: Evaluation questions 21
 - Annex 2: Documents Reviewed 23
 - Annex 3: Persons Interviewed 24
 - Annex 4: Acronyms 25

Acknowledgements

The evaluator wishes to place on record his thanks to all the women who gave up some of their valuable time to participate in this evaluation process. Staff of the All in One Women's Association were also critical in ensuring a smooth field mission by organizing meetings with an array of key stakeholders across Uganda. As were the UNDEF team who supported the organization of extensive in-country travel to facilitate as comprehensive an evaluation as possible.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this report are those of the evaluator. They do not represent those of UNDEF or any of the institutions referred to in the report.

Authors

This report was written by Jamie Hitchen.

I. OVERALL ASSESSMENT

From 1 February 2021 to 31 January 2023 the Kabale-based All in One Women's Association (ALOWA) implemented a project to strengthen grassroots women groups to promote and protect civic space across three of Uganda's four regions, encompassing 33 districts. The total budget was USD 220,000, which included USD 20,000 set aside for monitoring and evaluation by UNDEF. The project targeted the empowerment of 7,900 predominantly women – both individuals and groups - through initiatives designed to raise awareness of gender specific rights and address gendered injustice. Its overall objective was strengthening the capacity of grassroots women to mobilise into groups that can participate in decision-making processes and promote and protect civic space in Uganda.

The project was largely able to deliver the extensive amounts of training to grassroots women set out in the project document and to support the building and registration of grassroots women's groups at the district level. However, limited documentation to support the effectiveness and impact of these interventions, and the ways in which they supported the achievement of the projects outcomes and overall objective, make it difficult to say definitely, and in a quantifiable way, that the project aided efforts to strengthen women's ability to promote and protect civic space in Uganda, which has increasingly come under threat in recent years.

In that sense the **relevance** of the intervention was highly pertinent, both in its focus on preservation of civic space and in its efforts to engage grassroots women. However, the evaluation identifies two challenges regarding the relevance of the intervention. The first is the lack of engagement with men about the importance of women's rights which prevented many women from being able to apply the knowledge they acquired during their participation in the project. Another centres on the decision to actively encourage compliance with the registration requirements of the restrictive and civic space shrinking NGO Act of 2016, albeit a legal requirement, for local CBOs and NGOs, in a project that sought to promote and strengthen Uganda's civic space.

The **coherence** of the project was clear and aligned well with the existing work done by the grantee, which was also able to expand its networks and national recognition as a result of its interventions under this project. However, in some instances women groups formulated under the project appeared more focused on economic empowerment, above civic engagement, though it is important to recognise that the former can be a precursor for the latter.

The overall **effectiveness** of the project is perhaps where the core shortcomings of this project are laid bare. This is not to say that the trainings and technical support were not well delivered, and in fact conversations with direct beneficiaries, were on the whole very positive, but the lack of documentation to support stated results in the narrative reporting makes it difficult to comprehensively assess the extent to which the outputs had an effect on the achievement of the project's stated outcomes and objective. In short, the lack of a robust results and monitoring framework, and the absence of a dedicated individual to monitor and capture insights that could demonstrate achievements of key targeted indicators significantly impacted on the project's ability to demonstrate effectiveness.

Efficiency was an area where the project excelled on the other hand. In spite of some challenges posed by Covid-19 and the multitude of activities taking place in a significant number of geographic locations the project was delivered on time and with strict adherence to the proposed budget. The use of regional representatives and district volunteer coordinators, for the most part, got around the lack of implementing partners in regions where ALOWA was not physically present. But whilst they ensure effective implementation, more could have been done to ensure they supported efforts at documenting the project's effectiveness and impact.

The **impact** of the project on individuals spoken to for this evaluation was altogether positive, with respondents noting greater awareness around key issues or a feeling of being part of a wider effort to promote women in the district. However, it is more difficult to say categorically that these empowered women, or groups, contributed to the achievement of the envisaged outcomes, particularly around greater civic and political participation of women. Nonetheless, the evaluation took place shortly after the conclusion of the project and the fact that women groups, WHRD Committees and NGOs are still in existence, and the latter have developed strategies for continuing to work on issues around the civic space suggest that project impacts could continue to be felt.

The creation of these groups and networks is a key component of the project's **sustainability** in that, at the very least, the project has created platforms in which women feel comfortable to meet and discuss on a whole range of issues. It has also aided the grantee's institutional sustainability by broadening awareness of its actions and in turn subscriptions to the association.

Drawing on this assessment the evaluator makes a number of key recommendations:

- Educate men on the importance of including women in local decision making as this can facilitate greater change in actions of female beneficiaries.
- Include small amounts of funding that groups could apply for to support the application of project learning and to build community networks.
- Compliance with legal requirements cannot be ignored but could have been combined with additional components aimed at building momentum for reforms to challenge the restrictive regulatory environment through improved public awareness.
- Employ or designate a dedicated person to oversee monitoring, evaluating and documenting learning from project activities, and develop a robust system for collecting and collating this data, so that it can be used as evidence to support results.
- Introduce pre and post training evaluations to measure knowledge acquired by participants.

It also highlights lessons learned that could be applied to other projects in this context and/or related to this theme:

- Economic empowerment can put people in a position to care more about advocating for and advancing their rights. Therefore, projects should seek to incorporate an economic development component as part of a more holistic approach to efforts targeting heightened civic engagement.

- Empowering women when it comes to realizing their rights, not just learning about them, requires the support of men – both in their family and in the community at-large – and they should be brought on board to champion wider societal transformation around gender.
- Bringing together groups of women in places where they feel comfortable talking and discussing issues can help build longer-term momentum for a shift in attitudes, even if this is very hard to measure.
- The volume of activities does not always equate to a greater impact. Sometimes giving more focus, either in terms of geographic spread or to the activities being undertaken, can generate more sustained and involved engagement and more substantive change.
- Supporting a grantee to expand its geographical area of operation can enable them to create and build new networks that can increase awareness of what they do and even contribute to institutional sustainability.
- Consideration of the inclusion of key stakeholders – particularly the government and its officials – and their role in constricting or broadening the civic space needs to be given careful consideration during the design phase.

II. PROJECT CONTEXT AND STRATEGY

(i) Development context

Long-standing inequalities in the gender distribution of economic and financial resources have placed women at a disadvantage relative to men in their capacity to participate in, contribute to and benefit from broader processes of development in Uganda. Women continue to be largely absent from key decision-making forums shaping the allocation of economic and financial resources and opportunities, which further perpetuates gender inequality, particularly at district and sub-district level.

Women are less likely than men to have the education, contacts and resources needed to become effective leaders, even at the community level. Socio-cultural factors also contribute barriers to women’s participation. In many communities, traditions continue to restrict women’s primary roles as “in the home”. This contributes to a lack of economic independence, which along with socio-cultural attitudes, is one of the biggest obstacles that prevent women from participating more actively advancing civic debate and discussion in Uganda.

When grassroots women’s groups and organizations are formulated and empowered, they are constrained in how they organize, assemble or associate freely due by restrictive laws, including the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) Act of 2016. The web of bureaucratic red tape it mandates constitutes a significant hurdle for individuals wishing to form or run an NGO or community-based organization (CBO). Limited capacity and awareness of what it takes to comply with the provisions it sets out in order to operate legally, means that many NGOs and CBOs are not compliant, with several suspended from operating as a result in recent years, particularly those working to challenge the status quo, be that politics or when it comes to attitudes around rights.

It has been argued that this kind of “legal framework for the registration and operation of NGOs reflects a deep distrust of their activities and discounts their vital role in socio-political development”¹. It supplements wider limitations that are placed on the civic space in Uganda both formally and informally, with state actors perceiving those in civil society who seek to challenge the position of the ruling party as being “agents of opposition” and labelling them accordingly. This is despite Article 38 of the Ugandan constitution of 1995 stating that citizens have a right to participate in the governance affairs of their country through either their elected representatives or through civic organisations. In its most recent assessment, the CIVICUS civic space monitor categorised civic space in Uganda as “repressed”². Although civil society organizations (CSOs) exist, “their advocacy work is regularly impeded, and they face threats of de-registration and closure by the authorities”³.

(ii) The project objective

All in One Women’s Association (ALOWA) – an association funded by both donor partners and membership contributions - implemented a project to strengthen grassroots women groups to promote and protect civic space across three of Uganda’s four regions, encompassing 33 districts between February 2021 and January 2023. The total budget for project activities and implementation was USD 200,000.

Its overall objective was to strengthen the capacity of grassroots women to mobilize into groups so that they can participate in decision-making processes and promote and protect civic space in Uganda. This was to be achieved, first of all, by empowering grassroots women with the knowledge and skills through training to participate in decision making process and politics in ways that supports efforts to address gender-based injustice. This was to be complemented by the creation and strengthening of women’s groups, in terms of their capacity and advocacy skills, to provide a space for women to organize, mobilise and push forward their agenda. By networking these groups together and supporting the development of wider strategies to help them navigate the civic space the project aimed to enhance the participation and empowerment of women in society and to create grassroots advocates for the widening of civic space in Uganda.

(iii) Project strategy and approach

The overarching premise of the project's implicit theory of change, which was constituted by the evaluator following a review of the project document, was that greater awareness of rights and responsibilities among grassroots women to participate in local decision-making processes, further strengthened by the mobilisation of these women into local groups that are able to register with and engage district officials and residents, and alongside existing women-focused organizations, can support the promotion and preservation of a more open civic space in Uganda, particularly for women. It was to do this primarily through the empowerment of

¹ <http://www.civicus.org/media/Analysis-Uganda-NGO-legal-framework.pdf>

² <https://monitor.civicus.org/>

³ <https://acme-ug.org/wp-content/uploads/Uganda-Civic-Space-Index-2021-NCHRDU.pdf>

grassroots women, and by building and supporting the creation of wider networks. However, the project also sought to engage with district government officials, in recognition that partnerships with all key stakeholders were important in efforts to support and protect civic space in Uganda.

Figure 1: Implicit Theory of Change



In total almost 8,000 direct beneficiaries – both individuals and groups, the vast majority of which were women - across Uganda, were targeted as the main direct beneficiaries of the intervention. This included 4,150 grassroots women who would benefit from project training activities to widen their knowledge, and in some cases support their participation and leadership in grassroots women structures or engage with NGO District Monitoring Committees (DMCs), officials from which along with volunteer lawyers were brought on board by the project to ensure CBOs/NGOs were registered, in compliance with the law. Covering 33 districts across three of the four main regions of Uganda – western, eastern and northern – the project had a sizeable geographic scope and reach for the activities undertaken which included:

- A media campaign – on radio and social media – on women’s rights;
- Trainings on gender rights and women’s political participation for women from grassroots women’s groups;
- Public debates, community meetings and roundtables to discuss issues that affect female participation in decision making processes;
- The formation of Woman Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) committees and strengthening of their internal capacity;
- Training for WRHDs and women’s groups on the 2016 NGO Act and technical assistance to support registration/compliance;
- Technical and financial support to established women’s groups and NGOs to promote and protect civic space in Uganda.

III. METHODOLOGY

This evaluation draws on both existing and available project documentation and relevant reports, and supplements the information presented in these with 19 key informant interviews (KIIs), using a semi-structured guide, and a brief online survey for the 33 Women Human Rights Defender (WHRD) Committee leaders that benefitted from project training and support. Financial constraints and capacity concerns expressed by the implementing partner, meant that focus group discussions were not used as part of this evaluation, although they could have been helpful in shedding further light.

Documents reviewed included the project document, mid-term progress and milestone verification reports (all of which were written not by an observer but by the grantee due to Covid-19 restrictions), the training manuals used for engaging women and for supporting NGO registration, the advocacy and networking strategic document compiled by the project to support grassroots women groups, an example of a women-focused NGO's strategy for sustaining its engagement on promoting and protecting civic space and the final narrative and financial reports.

The KIIs took place in four districts – Kabale and Mbarara (western region), Gulu (northern region) and Mbale (eastern region) - in an effort to ensure a degree of coverage of at least one district in each of the three regions in which the project was implemented. Kabale is where the grantee is based and along with Mbarara, where several key stakeholders in the project are located, while Gulu and Mbale were selected at random and in part because of the logistical feasibility of visiting them in the short fieldwork period. For the most part interviews were conducted in person and in English. Although due to the location of some respondents – in hard-to-reach rural parts of a district far from the main town – a handful were conducted by phone. Whilst the grantee and its district volunteers supported with the arranging of interviews, they were not present during the discussion so as to allow key stakeholders to share their experiences freely.

There are a couple of noteworthy limitations to this methodological approach. Firstly, although many respondents were able to communicate effectively in English, they would have likely felt more comfortable expressing themselves in a local language. This likely limited their ability to fully engage in responding to some of the more technical questions. Also, given the scope of the project the evaluation cannot claim to be exhaustive, as less than 10% of project districts were visited. Even within these three districts there were notable differences in implementation and impact, suggesting that selecting different districts may have altered, to an extent, the overall evaluation findings. But this approach was necessitated by the time and money available for the evaluation and the online survey was an attempt to broaden the geographic scope of the information collected.

The online survey questions, designed to try and better ascertain the effectiveness and impact of the project's training and support, were issued during the field mission via email, with lists provided by the grantee. A response rate of 72% was received for the surveys issued to WHRD committee heads, but with less than 10% of responses received a second survey issued to the

100 women groups supported by the project was discounted for use in the final evaluation. Explanations for the lack of responses can be attributed to the short-time period the request was made in, the limited access of many of these groups to the internet and a lack of familiarity with the evaluator, even though ALOWA staff were included in all digital communication.

IV. EVALUATION FINDINGS

The findings presented below draw heavily on the KIIs undertaken by the evaluator as well as the information provided in the reviewed project documents. They are captured in regard to six key criteria: relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability.

(i) Relevance

A key aspect of the relevance of the project implemented by ALOWA pertains to whether efforts to register grassroots women's groups⁴ as CBOs and NGOs, and in doing so complying with a restrictive piece of legislation – the 2016 NGO Act, did in fact contribute to, or undermine, the wider objective of promoting and protecting Uganda's civic space. When registering at the district level documents get given not just to the NGO DMC but also to the District Internal Security Officer – Uganda's domestic intelligence agency - in an illustration of the level of control and oversight the state is keen to maintain over civil society. At the same time, registration is essential for these groups if they want to be permitted to receive donor and other funding. It can also help to boost perceptions of them within communities and the constitutions can provide guidance for dispute resolution if required. As one DMC official noted, "registration shows a CBO's seriousness" whilst a local CBO in eastern region noted that "without it [registration] we are not seen".

These examples illustrate the balance that needs to be struck between complying with the existing framework and pushing back against it. In the case of this project, the balance was weighted too far in favour of compliance, with a number of project activities designed around getting CBOs/NGOs registered, without sufficient discussion of the ways that normalizing this requirement did not protect or promote the civic space, but arguably further entrenched a constriction of it. Clearly this is a tricky issue, given that registration is a legal requirement in Uganda, but the project design and its implementation did not sufficiently discuss or address the tensions in this approach.

Linked to this discussion about the way the project sought to engage with and protect the civic space, is an even broader question about whether the grassroots women who benefitted from the project saw this as a priority for them. It was notable that a number of the women groups created by the project in the districts visited by the evaluator were primarily focused on income generation or economic activities. It was not altogether clear from discussions with their

⁴ To register with the state a CBO/NGO needs a constitution which states their objectives and goals, meeting minutes and a document signed by all group members. Fees are UGX 40,000 (USD 10) for CBOs and UGX 100,000 (USD 25) for NGOs, with applications approved at either the district level (NGOs) or sub county (CBO).

representatives the extent to which these activities, or the groups themselves, contributed to the project’s wider objective of the promotion and/or protection of the civic space.

However, economic empowerment can be a fundamental building block that allows women to go ahead and realise their human and political rights. Reflecting an opinion shared by several respondents, one woman asked, “when you talk about political and human rights and there is nothing in your pocket, how will it work?”. She made the case for a more holistic approach that integrates economic empowerment into more rights-based focused initiatives. The need for this is clear, and the fact that the project was willing to recognize the importance of economic activities for grassroots women, and hence support groups focused primarily on this thematic area, is important to recognise.

But in engagements with several women groups – this was less the case for those women who joined and formed Women Human Rights Defender Committees – it was unclear how the knowledge acquired at the training about rights and civic space, was applied in their groups’ actions, which focused almost entirely on economic endeavours. For example, one respondent in Gulu explained how the group that the project had helped constitute was involved in the rearing and selling of goats with little to no mention of notions of civic space. This raises questions about the extent to which the project design focus was driven more by the grantee than a bottom-up push from grassroots women.

The project’s focus on grassroots women, individuals and groups, in an effort to boost their standing in, and contribution to, local decision making was a good attempt to empower a segment of society too often omitted from wider development issues. However, focusing almost exclusively on educating and empowering women – whilst men were not prevented from participating and were able to hear the radio jingles and discussions produced by the project they were not integrated fully – arguably limited the transformative impact and application of knowledge acquired from the training and legal advice offered by the project. This was a view shared by several respondents across districts, but in particular in the western region.

A more inclusive approach to gender

Respondents generally noted that the project would have benefitted from a more inclusive conception of gender in the implementation and design of the project:

“Women educating women is nice as it allows for us to be freer, but we need to also educate men to promote equality”.

“Men need to understand the rights of women if those rights are to be realised. Women can understand their rights, but without the backing of their husband they will struggle to realise them”.

“Men are a clear obstacle to the enhancement of women’s development and rights”.

Another area for discussion in this section, relates to the decision to use a social media campaign – predominantly Facebook and WhatsApp – alongside more traditional media to raise awareness of the project and to discuss key issues relating to the preservation of the civic space. Given the levels of access to digital communication tools of many of the targeted beneficiaries, alongside their limited literacy and the fact that Facebook remains inaccessible without using a VPN in Uganda, this does not appear to have been a particularly relevant component of the project’s public engagement efforts. Furthermore, the bulk of social media content produced in English – which was not the case when it came to local radio discussions – which further increased the inaccessibility of the content to grassroots women and which had knock on consequences for effectiveness.



Image 1 : ALOWA Facebook page, May 2023

The fact that the ALOWA Facebook page has only 93 followers as at end of May 2023 illustrates the limited relevance of the platform. ALOWA staff also acknowledged that “most women didn’t have internet access, so these messages didn’t reach them”, but they pointed out that WhatsApp in particular “allowed us to engage with heads of women groups, who in turn spread the messages to their members who were offline through word of mouth”. This online-offline flow of information from social media to more traditional channels of communication is important to recognize and does allow messages created online to reach an offline audience, but the social media campaign was not explicit in how or if it recognized this and sought to utilize it.

(ii) Coherence

“ALOWA normally focuses just on the western region, but this project allowed us to expand our scope and gain a stronger presence in other parts of the country” stated a senior staff member. The scope of the project was highly ambitious, with 33 districts spread across three of Uganda’s four regions targeted for engagement. This was done without an implementing partner and without the organization having a significant track record of working in the northern and eastern regions. However, the grantee has significant experience identifying,

engaging and training grassroots women, and even supporting their formation into groups and collectives, and this was demonstrated throughout the project with high levels of attendance at project activities and trainings and targets around group formation and registration also achieved.

This project provided an opportunity for the grantee to broaden its networks beyond western region. Broadening its network, and consequentially its membership, has clear benefits for the grantee not just for its reach and recognition but also in boosting its sustainability. ALOWA individual members pay UGX 50,000 and so “adding more members can help with the financial sustainability of the organisation”. There were no set criteria for the selection of districts to be included in the project but in general ALOWA’s work appears to have aligned with other women’s groups in the districts where it was undertaking trainings and forming human rights defender committees. This was not possible to assess in all districts but in Mbale a respondent noted that “there is not too much duplication from what I see”. However, it was unclear if and how ALOWA’s broader efforts to promote and protect the civic space aligned with other national initiatives targeting improvements in awareness of the civic space or the provisions of the NGO Act⁵ or women’s empowerment.

(iii) Effectiveness

Measuring the effectiveness of this project is difficult as a result of a dearth of concrete evidence to support claimed results. Statements in the final narrative reports that target indicators were achieved in line with the proposed results framework (particularly linked to Outcome 1) were not substantiated by evidence to that effect. For example, indicator 1.2 of the results framework targeted 20% of the 3,000 women trained to be ‘participating in the political process in the country’. But although this was stated as being achieved in the final narrative report there is no evidence to support the claim. Similar challenges exist for the achievement of other indicators under the first outcome and even in regard to the third outcome. Although more measurable, even indicators in the second outcome are not supported by clear evidence. The evaluator was not able to secure a comprehensive list of NGOs/CBOs registered under the project to confirm that target indicator 2.1 was achieved as stated, though engagements at the district level suggested this was the case and in fact could have overachieved the target.

This lack of a robust results and monitoring framework and the absence of a dedicated individual to monitor and capture the impacts of the project – even the case studies presented in the narrative reports lacked potency - were clear project design flaws that significantly impacted on the project’s ability to demonstrate effectiveness. That is not to say that training exercises were not beneficial for recipients and that they *could* have supported the achieving of stated targets. In fact, some anecdotal evidence gathered during the evaluation was in support of this. Respondents described it as “much needed”, “informative” and “the sort of thing we still need more of”. Some mentioned having gained a much better understanding of what civic space was, that women’s rights were human rights and around the importance of

⁵ <https://chapterfouruganda.org/sites/default/files/downloads/Simplified-Guide-to-the-NGO-Act-2016.pdf>

engaging with other women to strengthen their collective voice. But on the whole, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of the project objectively due to a lack of evidence.



Image 2: Female participants at ALOWA training

There was also insufficient documentation of how outputs, particularly training, contributed towards envisaged outcomes. The act of holding the training is only one component, there is a secondary element – the application of that learning in practice – if women are to go from having greater knowledge of their rights to “participating in the decision-making process by raising awareness of gender specific rights” as is laid out in the first outcome. Documenting this would have enabled the grantee to make a more robust argument for the project outcomes being achieved. However, it focused more on turnout at meetings and trainings as indicators of effectiveness.

More robust efforts to engage with project beneficiaries and capture their feedback of the project activities was also a shortcoming. Although feedback was gathered at the end of training sessions through post-training feedback forms – which asked about how participants found the training, its impacts, their challenges, whether it met expectations, what they learned and what more ALOWA can do - these were poorly documented and not used to inform tweaks and improvements to the content, delivery, or other aspects of the training. One respondent felt as though the training, which took place in a mix of English and local languages, “could have looked to use more of drama and things like this so as not to be so desk-based in its method of learning”.

Informal feedback from trainers, ALOWA regional representatives and district volunteer coordinators capturing wider project implementation was largely provided through WhatsApp groups and calls, but the lack of a system for documenting such means that they were unavailable to the evaluator. This systemic lack of internal documentation could have posed significant challenges to project implementation if there had been significant changes in personnel during the project, but this risk was avoided by the fact that ALOWA project staff were unchanged throughout the project.

A shortage of robust evidence

In the implementation of the project there was insufficient evidence generated to demonstrate the project's outcomes and impacts:

“Using WhatsApp is how I shared updates and reflections with ALOWA, we had an annual monitoring report which was templated but otherwise it was more informal in terms of how I provided more regular feedback”.

“We don't have figures on [radio] listenership, but many people know about us, and radio remains a key medium for engagement, particularly when it comes to reaching grassroots communities”.

“Women would give us feedback on what they learned at trainings, this would include information about what they now understood and areas they were still unsure about. But I would not say it was rigorously applied to improving future trainings”.

In other instances, project partners did not have the numbers to provide more detailed evidence of reach. One of the regional radio partners, which hosted two talk shows per month where ALOWA staff and experts came on to talk about women's rights, civic space and registering groups did not have listenership figures for the sub-regions it covers. The reach of social media campaigns undertaken by the project were also limited by challenges of access for grassroots women that were being targeted and the limited followership of the grantee on its Facebook page – just 93 followers at the time of evaluation.

Whilst the project largely did do a good job of identifying grassroots women, using radio and their own networks, ensuring that those who benefited from the project were rooted in their local communities and able to penetrate in more rural parts of the country. It remains unclear as to the extent to which they were able to meet ambitious targets of female beneficiaries as laid out in the project document, which committed to ensuring representation of women in slums, refugees, prisoners, those with disabilities, informal economy vendors and even sex workers. Nonetheless the project did a good job of engaging with women and women groups outside of district headquarters and its ability to penetrate into more rural parts of the country, aided its ability to engage with grassroots and marginalised communities of women.

The evaluation also finds that WHRD committees - each committee had 12 focal persons including a chair, and they helped educate other women and get groups registered, with support of legal experts - were good sources of support for women's groups in the district. The online survey data also suggests that committee heads had a good understanding of the NGO Act, something they were trained on as part of the project, but without a baseline it is hard to know if this was knowledge acquired during the project and given the self-reported nature of the data, how objectively good this understanding is. But KII respondents broadly agreed, with one noting that “without a committee, activities would have been more scattered and lacking focus, but having community women pushing others forward built credibility and sustainability”. This is a key point and reaffirms the importance of building grassroots momentum and structures to support the project's overall effectiveness, something that the grantee did, with varying degrees of success.

Women Human Rights Defender Committee's actions

- 54% of respondents to the evaluator conducted online survey said their committee engaged other women's group weekly, with the remaining 46% doing so monthly.
- There was also sustained engagement recorded with the NGO DMC: 71% engaged on a monthly basis.

Variation within such a project is to be expected, given that it took place across 33 districts, with each likely to take different trajectories based on local dynamics and the individuals involved. This was something that emerged from conversations in the four different districts visited for the evaluation. In Gulu, for example, there was stalled momentum and a lack of cohesion among women group networks and the WHRD Committee, whilst in Mbale a strong and cohesive network of women's groups, with stronger coordination and connection to the district council was observed. But this more nuanced assessment of effectiveness was not clearly documented in project reporting even though it could have been helpful in driving internal lessons learned processes.

Finally, the effectiveness of the project to build networks that extended beyond the district, and brought together women's groups, CBOs or even NGOs, and brought together these actors was also mixed. Whilst the project developed a 'Advocacy and Network Strategy for Women's Groups and Grassroots Defenders', which was designed to facilitate this cross-district engagement, the assumption that it would then be used to build stronger networks was not always realized in practice. Whilst in Mbarara, one respondent highlighted the way the WHRD Committee in Mbarara was working with others to build a sub-region coalition – and that engagements took place both in-person but also among its leadership using WhatsApp – in Gulu, one respondent lamented the fact that “we didn't have any communication or engagement with other districts during the project”.

(iv) Efficiency

On the whole the project was efficiently implemented, with the significant number of activities delivered on time and in accordance with the proposed budget despite its geographical scope and restrictions imposed by the Government of Uganda in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In June 2021 restrictions, including a ban on inter-district travel and the banning of public gatherings, disrupted the project's implementation but after these were lifted in September ALOWA was able to catch up on the activities it had been unable to complete in this period without any significant derailment to the overall timelines of the project. “We either caught up or did them online [not trainings but other project activities or the development of materials] so the financial impacts were minimal” noted a staff member. That is not to say that Covid-19 requirements did not have any effect on the project. “To manage implementation during Covid-19 we respected the standard operating procedures introduced by the government, we had masks and sanitizer at meetings and hired bigger halls to allow for safe participation” explained an ALOWA staff member. Highlighting that “although this had budget implications these were navigated effectively”.

The evaluation launch note document noted concerns about the fact that the utilisation rate for the project was at 100% for all budget lines, despite a fluid operating environment. But from discussions with ALOWA's finance team this was, in part, a reflection of their understanding of what UNDEF expects from its grantees. This meant that ALOWA worked only with service providers within the proposed budget, thereby ensuring it spent exactly the amounts budgeted. This was also made more possible by the project's extensive use of per diems and salaries/consultancy fees which are set amounts that did not fluctuate. However, it was acknowledged that for items with a set price, notably fuel which increased during the project's implementation period, the amount budgeted was spent, but that this translated into a smaller volume. Nonetheless this was not significant to disrupt project implementation plans. Despite this being the single largest grant that the organisation had received, the financial systems in place were strong and robust, and provided good accountability.

In fact, the project in general should be commended for the value for money offered in undertaking a huge number of training and support activities across 33 districts of the country. This was further enabled by the implementing structure designed by the project. Although the project design did not include regional implementing partners in northern and eastern regions, where ALOWA was not physically present, the creation of regional representatives and district volunteer coordinators acted, to an extent, in lieu of local implementing partners, providing general, albeit largely informal, oversight and feedback on the project's implementation. Regular digital check ins, often through WhatsApp groups, led by ALOWA staff, also enabled the project to directly engage with women groups, lawyers, WHRDs committee leaders and district government officials to provide and receive updates on progress. This form of communication was more relevant, and aided coordination and communication during Covid-19 imposed lockdowns that limited the ability of the grantee and participants to physically move, even within their districts.

The approach was largely supported by evaluation respondents with one of the lawyers involved in supporting women groups to get registered remarking that "ALOWA would support us to do the work we were doing. They evaluated us to make sure we had performed to the high expectations, but they gave us lots of space to engage with participants and to be free in our engagements". Not all respondents agreed however, with a handful remarking on the "little follow up engagement" that happened in person after the trainings were completed. Another noted that "ALOWA did not have an office, and that perhaps it would have been a good idea".

But the lack of a significant physical presence was not a major obstacle to the efficiency of the project's implementation. In fact, it was only able to deliver at the scale it did because by relying on a combination of digital check ins and regional representatives, who were largely able to ensure that the project was implemented as planned in the project document and with the envisaged direct beneficiaries reached. Even if, as documented in the effectiveness section, these structures were not set up to document the project's impact. Furthermore, in building and extending its networks beyond the western region, ALOWA was also strengthened as an organization.

(v) Impact

Whilst there is evidence to suggest that grassroots women groups have been constituted and strengthened by the project, mainly by their continued existence and engagement even after the project's conclusion, there is less evidence to support claims that the project activities saw individuals and groups change their behavior and actions as a consequence. That said, the evaluation heard examples in a number of areas where individuals and groups are now doing things differently and better protecting their rights as a result of the projects interventions.

The fact that a significant majority of women groups have been brought together and registered themselves with sub-county or district councils, is a notable shift that the project's training and technical legal support has been instrumental in facilitating. Beyond the stated results in the final narrative report, individuals spoken to during the evaluation spoke of at least five CBOs being registered in one sub-county of Mbarara district, whilst in Mbale district at least 15 groups have been registered. Some of these registered groups have been integrated into government programmes in the district such as the Community Livelihood Investment Project and National Agricultural Advisory Services and benefited from the financial support both of which provide to women's groups. The fact that there are organised groups of women in a district "offers a space for women to be safe and to try and build their knowledge", even if this does not require registration to happen. However, a number of these groups are centered around economic and income generating activities and there is no obvious connection in what they do to promoting and protecting the civic space, for now at least.

At a more individual level, the knowledge acquired during the training has "opened our eyes" according to one respondent but it has not always done so in a way that changes behaviours. Limitations, particularly linked to finance, continue to be a challenge for the realisation of the project's goals. As one local female leader explained, "the knowledge we got from ALOWA is supporting us to train other women groups. But we need more materials to further spread the impact, funding is still insufficient, and this can impact sustainability". In Gulu for example, a respondent was open in saying that "in all honesty the women HRD committee has not done very much as a result of these logistical challenges, we need to be face to face". The attitudes of many men in target communities have also been a challenge in that women are prevented from applying what they have learned in the trainings due to prevailing patriarchal societal attitudes. The wider environment in Uganda, which continues to see a closing of civic space,

particularly as it relates to politics, but also on human rights issues which makes effort to promote and protect it more complicated, is also a factor that has limited impact.



Image 3 : ALOWA training

Advancing the knowledge of women to stand up for their rights

Talking to direct beneficiaries for this evaluation it is clear the project has impacted on their understandings of their rights as women and the way they see themselves:

“From the training I learned many things about respecting and standing up for my rights which I have told my friends who did not attend”.

“Many women now have a fresh perspective on rights issues. Previously many didn’t know they had rights but now they do. There is a mindset change going on and the groups can sustain that, to some extent”.

“Women feared to talk before the project, but now feel freer to talk or even go on the radio and report incidents or issues that transgress their rights, because they are more aware of these rights. The fact fellow women are doing this inspires others”.

These statements all point to the project’s immediate impacts on the direct beneficiaries it has engaged. But how those changes in individual knowledge and behaviour, or the ways in which newly established and registered groups, are able to leverage that change to deliver impacts at the outcome and objective level are less clear and may take more time to be realised. Thus, whilst we can say that the project has had positive impacts on individual participants, in particular grassroots women across Uganda, it is not consistently the case that these micro-level impacts have created more macro-level changes that have seen grassroots women groups and networks to the fore in promoting and protecting civic space.

(vi) Sustainability

The sustainability of the intervention is looked at from two perspectives. The first is the way in which the groups and networks established by the project will be able to sustain themselves, thereby embedding grassroots structures across the 33 districts targeted. The second is to understand how the approach of the project, and in particular the broadening of the geographic coverage area of ALOWAs operation, could further support the organization’s sustainability.

In 2022, the grantee received UGX 260 million in association subscriptions – it charges UGX 50,000 for individuals, UGX 100,000 for small groups and UGX 200,000 for large groups, plus one-off joining fees of the same amount. The project, and the expansion of awareness about ALOWA in northern and eastern regions of the country helped increase this revenue from UGX 190 million the year before. Therefore, the project can be said to have helped contribute to the fiscal sustainability of some of the organization’s core operations and activities.

Many established women’s groups constituted by the project also employ a similar model in the structures they have created, with membership fees at least enabling a degree of continued functionality even if members were frustrated that they lack more significant resources to

undertake activities that could help to educate other women or raise wider public awareness. For those that are registered, one of the benefits is that they are at least eligible to obtain funding, either from the government directly or from other donors. They also have technical resources – such as the advocacy action plans and the training manuals and materials – they received during the project. “The knowledge they have acquired and can draw on is the sustainability plan” argued one respondent.

At the very least many of the groups and WHRD Committees remained functional and operational at the time of the evaluation, which followed three months after the conclusion of the project, suggesting that the grassroots structures built by the project are being sustained. However, they may require ongoing technical and even financial support, to continue to push on rights-based protection and reform issues. The creation, and continued engagement, of broader cross-district or regional networks was less clear however despite their potential to be instrumental in building sustainable campaigns focused on improving Uganda’s civic space. Whilst in the Ankole-sub region groups had forged together into a network that was being sustained in other parts of the country this had not been realized.

(vii) UNDEF added value

The awarding of this grant came at an opportune time. In February 2021 the Ugandan government suspended the activities of the Democratic Governance Facility – a multi donor fund focused primarily on human rights and good governance that has invested huge sums of money in supporting local civil society organisations in Uganda for more than a decade. With this avenue now no longer available there is less support for the kind of grassroots mobilisation initiative that was supported with this UNDEF grant.

This was the largest grant ALOWA had ever received, and the support offered by UNDEF has aided its growth and development. It has been able to expand the areas in which it works and to build groups of more organized and better-informed grassroots women with whom it can continue to engage in other areas of its work. These sorts of networks can be invaluable for support gradual transformation on key rights-based issues and shifting gender attitudes, both issues on which ALOWA has a track record in.

However, UNDEF could have added further value, both to its own project and to building the capacity of the grantee, by taking a greater oversight role during the project. The fact that milestone verification reports were not done by an observer but by the grantee – a consequence of Covid-19 – meant that insufficient interrogation was done at an initial stage as to how internal monitoring and results collection was being done. This would have been an important area to assess more closely given that this was a first-time grantee and that the project proposal did not include a dedicated staff member assigned to do monitoring and evaluation of the project.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion	Recommendation
Women groups/WHRDs Committees tended to work in silos in their districts and did not sufficiently leverage wider cross-district networks which impacted on their <i>effectiveness and sustainability</i> .	Hold a learning event or peer-to-peer learning visits to bring select women groups/WHRD Committees together to share experiences and support the building of cross-district networks.
Project reporting failed to capture nuances and discrepancies of project implementation and <i>effectiveness</i> between districts.	Ensure that detailed and consistent project related reporting is internally reviewed on a quarterly or bi-annual basis, in an effort to deliver more adaptive programming during the implementation of a project.
More <i>effective</i> UNDEF oversight of this project could have addressed issues of evidence generation/a lack of M&E capacity that make the project's impacts hard to assess.	For new grantees, or grantees with limited prior experience, UNDEF should make sure all avenues are explored to ensure that independent observers complete established milestone verification exercises in person, where it is possible to do so.
The project was able to <i>effectively</i> target and engage grassroots rural women across the 33 districts who are largely absent from wider development efforts.	Continue to identify and work with grantees that can demonstrate a track record of engaging with grassroots communities.
Newly registered women's groups and WHRDs Committees lacked the financial resources to undertake awareness and engagement activities in their communities limiting <i>impact</i> .	Include a small, but sufficient budget, that groups could apply for, linked to a concrete idea, to apply some of their learning and build community networks.
The documentation of the project's <i>effectiveness and impact</i> was in short supply.	For a project with so many activities, there needs to be a dedicated person in charge of monitoring, evaluating, and learning, and a robust system for collecting data, so that evidence can be used to support results assessment and learning.
Many women did not fully feel the <i>impacts</i> of the knowledge gained as they felt, or were, prevented from applying the knowledge they acquired either by their husbands or by male community leaders and influential figures.	Educate men on the importance of including women in local decision making as this can facilitate greater change in actions of female beneficiaries.
Training was viewed and experienced positively by participants but there is limited evidence to demonstrate the <i>impacts</i> of what they learned.	Pre/post training evaluations to measure knowledge gain would ensure data to support qualitative assessments.

Individuals with improved awareness and understanding of their rights will not always apply them in practice reducing the <i>impact and sustainability</i> of an intervention.	Project design needs to account for this and make greater efforts to support individuals and groups to apply acquired knowledge rather than just assume because they have received training, they will apply it.
The <i>relevance</i> of the project's decision to push for compliance with the NGO Act of 2016 - legislation that is largely seen as limiting civic space - came across as somewhat contradictory.	Compliance with legal requirements cannot be ignored but could be combined with additional components aimed at building momentum for legislative reform through improved awareness.
Social media campaigns in English were not the most <i>relevant</i> way of reaching the targeted audience.	Work to identify the communication tools with the greatest local resonance and ensure that all material is at the very least translated into local languages.
The regional representatives and district volunteer coordinators were an <i>efficient and</i> cost effective way of ensuring ALOWA's presence in a district and reduced the need for implementing partners.	Better capacitate these individuals and provide consistent reporting mechanisms to enable more robust district level data collection.

VI. LESSONS LEARNED

- Prevailing poverty, a reality for many grassroots women, makes it hard for them to focus on pushing for their rights over economic necessity. In fact, economic empowerment can put people in a position to care more about the former and therefore projects that look to advance rights at this level should seek to incorporate an economic development component as part of the wider project.
- Communication strategies should reflect the local context and most importantly be tailored towards the target audience. It is therefore important to identify the communication tools with the greatest local resonance and translate all material into local languages.
- Empowering women when it comes to realizing their rights, not just learning about them, requires the support of men – both in their family and in the community at-large – and they should be brought on board to champion wider societal transformation around gender.
- It is vital to document and present evidence of how a project meets target indicators in the delivery of its activities both for internal learning but also to be able to demonstrate effectiveness and impact in a robust and comprehensive way. This requires a dedicated person in charge of monitoring, evaluating, and learning.
- It is incorrect to just assume that what people learn from training will then be applied in practice. There is another step in supporting them to feel confident to start believing and acting on what they now know and this needs to be better captured in project

designs, such as through sub-granted small projects, to ensure that outputs contribute to the achievement of outcomes.

- Supporting a grantee to expand its geographical area of operation can enable them to create and build new networks that can increase awareness of what they do and even contribute to institutional sustainability.
- Bringing together groups of women in places where they feel comfortable talking and discussing issues can help build longer-term momentum for a shift in attitudes, even if this is very hard to measure.
- The volume of activities proposed by a project does not always equate to a greater impact. Sometimes giving more focus, either in terms of geographic spread or to the activities being undertaken, can generate more sustained and involved engagement and more substantive change.
- For training to resonate and be most impactful, they need to be delivered in a setting and format that appeals to participants. Ensuring that they are conducted in the language participants are most familiar with and in an interactive and engaging format can aid with comprehension and ultimately impact.
- WhatsApp can be a key project management tool that delivers support to both cost-effective monitoring of implementation and the building of networks and structures. But this is most effective when combined with occasional in-person meetings or visits, to ensure personal relationships are built offline, before they are maintained, sustained, and developed online.
- Associations supported by paying members, more so than local NGOs, can benefit from projects that expand their areas of operations by adding members and thus improving their financial sustainability.
- Consideration of the inclusion of key stakeholders – particularly the government and its officials – and their role in constricting or broadening the civic space needs to be given careful consideration during the design phase so as to avoid having aspects of a project that reinforce efforts to shrink civic space.
- UNDEF can pro-actively make requests to the grantee during the implementation of the project for additional supporting documentation, when they feel as though greater evidence is needed to support recorded results and impacts.

ANNEXES

Annex 1: Evaluation questions

DAC criterion	Evaluation Question	Related sub-questions
Relevance	To what extent was the project, as designed and implemented, suited to context and needs of project beneficiaries?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Why was a key element of the project aimed at preserving the civic space in Uganda, to ensure compliance with the restrictive NGO Act? ▪ How has Uganda's civic space evolved since the start of the project in 2021? ▪ How did the approach for beneficiary and district selection ensure the most relevant participants were selected? And did the absence of male participants, overall, have any impacts (detrimental or positive)? ▪ Why did the project think that a social media campaign in English was the most effective way of reaching predominantly grassroots women?
Coherence	How well did the project "fit"; i.e. to what extent was the project compatible with other projects and programmes in the country, sector or institution?	<p>Internal coherence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To what extent are there synergies and interlinkages between the project and other initiatives carried out by the grantee? <p>External coherence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How does the project align with the work of other women networks in Uganda? ▪ To what extent is the project adding value while avoiding the duplication of efforts?
Effectiveness	To what extent was the project, as implemented, able to achieve objectives and goals?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To what extent have the project's objectives been reached? ▪ What evidence was collected to demonstrate how the outcomes and objectives of the project were met? ▪ Did the significant number of activities implemented by the project have an impact on the overall quality and effectiveness? ▪ Did the project activities support and sustain the wider goals of the project when it comes to advancing women rights and protecting civic space? ▪ Where it failed to meet the outputs identified in the project document, why was this?
Efficiency	To what extent was there a reasonable relationship between resources expended and project impacts?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Did institutional arrangements promote cost-effectiveness and accountability? ▪ Was the budget designed, and then implemented, in a way that enabled the project to meet its objectives? ▪ How were the challenges posed by Covid-19 effectively mitigated?

Impact	To what extent has the project put in place processes and procedures supporting the role of civil society in contributing to democratization, or to direct promotion of democracy?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To what extent has/have the realisation of the project objective(s) and project outcomes had an impact on improving civic space and/or female participation in decision making at district or regional levels? ▪ How has increased compliance with the NGO Act, for some women groups, aided their ability to conduct activities? ▪ Have the targeted beneficiaries and networks experienced tangible impacts? Which were positive; which were negative? And how well have these been documented? ▪ What role do the WHRD committees play in their communities and how much impact do they have?
Sustainability	To what extent has the project, as designed and implemented, created what is likely to be a continuing impetus towards women’s rights and protecting civic space?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How are, and will, the groups and networks built by the project taking on the issues beyond the life of the project? ▪ What impacts can they have in the short, medium, and longer term? ▪ Has ALOWA been able to grow its membership? And how does that contribute to its overall sustainability?
UNDEF value added	To what extent was UNDEF able to take advantage of its unique position and comparative advantage to achieve results that could not have been achieved had support come from other donors?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What was UNDEF able to accomplish, through the project that could not as well have been achieved by alternative projects, other donors, or other stakeholders? ▪ Could UNDEF have provided greater technical support to address M&E shortcomings during the project?

Given the insufficient information provided in the project documentation reviewed with regards to the impact of the project on beneficiaries the evaluator used two very short anonymous surveys, to be issued through ALOWA, and to be completed online using Google Forms to try and get a better picture of the project’s effectiveness and impact on WHRD Committees in the 33 districts targeted and the 100 unregistered women’s groups. Given that the second survey did not receive sufficient engagement to be usable, only the questions for the first survey are provided below.

- 1 District
- 2 How often does your committee engage with women groups in the district?
- 3 How often does your committee engage with the district NGO committee? (options: never, once a year, monthly, weekly, daily)
- 4 How well do you understand the provisions of the NGO Act of 2016? (options: V good, good, ok, poor, very poor)
- 5 Are you in contact with other women committees in the district or in other districts? (Yes, often – yes, but not very often – no, not at all)
- 6 Has the civic space for women rights defenders improved in the last year in your view? (Yes, stayed the same, no)

Annex 2: Documents Reviewed

The following documents were reviewed in preparing this evaluation report:

- UDF-19-UGA-845 Project Document
- UDF-19-UGA-845 Final Narrative Report
- Project financial utilization reports
- Two milestone verification reports
- ALOWA-FOCODE Legal Strategy Action Plan
- The Non-Governmental Organisations Act, 2016
- ALOWA 'Advocacy and Network Strategy for Women's Groups and Grassroots Defenders'
- ALOWA training manual – 'Strengthening Grassroots Women's Groups to Promote and Protect Civic Space in Uganda'
- National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders Uganda, 2021. "Uganda: Civic Space Index – Clawback clauses and impunity stifling freedoms"

Annex 3: Persons Interviewed

30 April 2023	
Arrival, international consultant	
1 May 2023	
Catherine Animaani	Project Manager, ALOWA
Sarah Kobusingye	District Volunteer Coordinator (Kabale), ALOWA
Justice Orishaba	Finance Manager, ALOWA
2 May 2023	
Samuel Mutaremwa	Community Development Officer, Kabale Municipal Council
Barnabas Tugumisirize	Producer, Freedom Radio
Travel to Mbarara district	
Dorothy Asiimwe	Member, Ankole Women in Development Association
Asia Nagumaba	Chairperson, WHRD Committee (Mbarara)
Susan Kentalo	Regional representative, ALOWA
Irene Kajumba	Director, Foundation for Women Action
3 May 2023	
Precious Yamsummulu	Communications Officer, ALOWA
Travel to Gulu district	
4 May 2023	
Catherine Taban	District Volunteer Coordinator (Gulu), ALOWA
Betty Laika	Chairperson, WHRD Committee (Gulu)
Mercy Musinguzi	Lawyer
Gracious Atuhaire	Lawyer
Annah Atuhaire	Consultant, ALOWA
5 May 2023	
Jane Abalo	Member, Together We Stand
Travel to Mbale district	
Immaculate Nabiffo	Member, District Monitoring Committee (Mbale)
Esther Hadondi	District Volunteer Coordinator (Mbale), ALOWA
Esther Akello	Chairperson, WHRD Committee (Mbale)
6 May 2023	
Departure, international consultant	

Annex 4: Acronyms

CBO	Community based organization
DMC	District Monitoring Committee
NGO	Non-governmental organization
UNDEF	United Nations Democracy Fund
WHRD	Women Human Rights Defender