

SUSTAINING WOMEN'S CSOS IN CRISIS SETTINGS THROUGH CORE FUNDING

BACKGROUND

As part of the United Nations Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF) Global Learning Hub (L-HUB) Peer Exchange Sessions bring together women's rights and women-led civil society organizations (CSOs) supported by the WPHF to exchange lessons learned on topics related to women, peace and security, and humanitarian action (WPS-HA). This brief builds on discussions from the exchange held in May 2025 "Core funding for women's rights and youth focused organizations in crisis settings: practices for resilience and innovation"¹ with CSO [partners Syrian Youth Council \(SYC\)](#) from Syria, [Centre Multidisciplinaire d'Appui pour le Développement des Femmes et Familles \(CEMADEF\)](#) from the Democratic Republic of Congo, [Borderless](#) from Lebanon and [Pakigdait Alang sa Pag-amoma sa Kalinaw](#) from the Philippines.

The session was informed by a desk review of various WPHF-supported CSO experiences with core funding, with particular attention to youth-focused organizations. The session was also developed in response to CSOs' demand for knowledge exchange on financial sustainability strategies. Hence, the brief explores uses and impacts of core funding as crucial drivers for the continuity of women's CSOs in the current context of global insecurity, increased militarization, women's rights pushback and funding crisis.

WHAT IS CORE FUNDING AND WHY IT MATTERS IN CONFLICT AND EMERGENCY CONTEXTS

Core funding refers to flexible financial support aimed at strengthening an organization's institutional capacity and long-term sustainability. Unlike project-specific funding, it allows organizations to cover essential operational costs, such as staff salaries, and to invest in strategic areas that promote stability, growth, and greater impact in their WPS-HA work.

In times of crisis, women's rights and women-led CSOs are often the first responders on the ground. They possess a deep knowledge of the local context and are the best placed to understand the needs of their communities. However, without adequate resources, their ability to act can be severely limited, especially if they lack strong institutional foundations to access additional funding. Despite their critical, life-saving presence in conflict and emergency affected contexts, many CSOs face financial constraints. By providing flexible support, core funding enables CSOs to remain operational during crises and avoid being left without direction or means when their support is most needed. As part of its commitment to support women led and women's rights CSOs in conflict and humanitarian contexts, WPHF has provided over 240 institutional funding grants to CSOs since 2020 for an amount of approximately 6.7 million USD.

1. The session's recording is available in [English](#) and other languages.

STRATEGIC USES OF CORE FUNDING BY CSOS

While there are many possible uses for core funding, this brief does not aim to be comprehensive. Instead, it highlights key impactful areas where CSOs have allocated such funding: Staff and Organizational Policy Development, Income-Generating Activities and Innovation and Technology.

A. [Staff and Organizational Policy Development](#)

Many CSOs used core funding to create, review and update their internal policies and systems in areas such as administration, finance, human resources, risk management, ethics, data protection, proposal and report writing and safeguarding. Others developed strategic documents such as codes of conduct, gender equality frameworks, and protection of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH) policies to help align their work with international standards. Other CSOs used institutional funding to revise their foundations, strategy and leadership. For example, in the Philippines, WPHF CSO partner [Pakigdait](#) revitalized its direction by updating its conceptual framework and embedding WPS as a central pillar of its interfaith peacebuilding work. This included establishing a Women of Faith Desk, integrating WPS into its operations manual, and ensuring equal representation of women in their board affirming that true peacebuilding must be inclusive and women led.

In addition, most CSOs provided a wide range of training opportunities to their staff, including junior professionals and volunteers, often designed after an assessment of internal capacities, needs and gaps. These included project management, financial and human resources management, child protection, monitoring and evaluation (M&E), advocacy, fundraising and photography and video editing. Some organizations conducted training on topics such as gender equality, gender-based violence (GBV) case management, ethical leadership, and psychosocial support. Trainings tailored to youth needs (e.g., digital literacy, proposal writing, leadership) were crucial in building youth staff's confidence and employability. In parallel, many CSOs carried out organizational evaluations, and strategic planning activities, often with the help of external consultants, to ensure their structures could meet emerging challenges.

CSOs also invested in mental health measures for their staff. For example, due to the impact of the ongoing war

in Gaza, WPHF CSO partner [Not to forget association](#) (Palestine) conducted a session to address the deteriorating psychological well-being of their team members. The session consisted in an open discussion about emotions and concerns, practicing relaxation techniques, and exploring strategies to effectively manage crises, particularly considering the worsening conditions in refugee camps.

Finally, several CSOs brought in external expertise by hiring specialists in communications, social media or accounting to develop innovative funding strategies and tools.

Enhancing staff's knowledge and competences contributed to stronger internal governance, better service delivery, and improved staff retention and loyalty towards the organization, while supporting the professional growth of both staff and volunteers. In crisis-affected areas, core funding helped CSOs rebuild operational capacity, re-think key policies, adapt to fast-changing conditions, escalation of violence and equip their teams to carry out their missions in line with humanitarian law and international norms.

B. [Income Generating Activities](#)

Core funding enabled many CSOs to launch income-generating initiatives that supported both their financial sustainability and the economic well-being of the communities they serve. In some cases, organizations used the funds to purchase items such as chairs, speakers, or moto taxis, which they could rent out to generate income for both the organization and their target groups. For example, one CSO bought pirogues, allowing staff to navigate their area of intervention more easily and enabling the women traders they support to cross rivers and access previously unreachable markets to sell their products.

Other CSOs established economic empowerment centers and launched income-generating initiatives in areas such as agriculture, gardening, vocational training, food preparation, and caregiving. They also invested in equipment (e.g. an ecological oven) that created new income streams and employment opportunities for their staff, for example, as tricycle drivers or canoe operators. One CSO, for instance, invested in floating fishing cages, which not only enhanced food security for the local community but also created new roles for staff members who now manage these facilities.

CSOs have shown remarkable creativity by using core funding to develop programs in education, art therapy and protection². Drawing on their skills and expertise, they have transformed these initiatives into marketable services offered to municipalities, institutions, NGOs, companies and other corporate actors, for staff well-being and team building generating income while expanding their impact.

In addition, CSOs working for women's economic empowerment and recovery in post conflict contexts have also established development loan schemes, using the interest earned to reinvest in their organizational activities and sustainability.

C. [Innovation and Technology](#)

Core funding gave CSOs the flexibility to invest in tools and infrastructure that made their work more effective and secure. Many used the funds to acquire computers, printers, office furniture, and other essential equipment. The installation of solar panels in Lebanon or Haiti, for example, reduced reliance on conventional energy sources, increased autonomy and savings, while promoting environmentally friendly practices. Several organizations also improved their financial systems by investing in accounting software such as [SAGE](#) and [QuickBooks](#), which made budgeting, reporting, and audits more efficient. Upgrades to internet connectivity, antivirus and data protection, and office lighting strengthened both cybersecurity and physical safety of CSOs' staff and target groups. This was an important step in safeguarding sensitive information, especially for CSOs working with marginalized groups such as sex workers or people living with HIV/AIDS.

Staff's skill building was closely linked to these investments in equipment. CSO teams were trained in computer use, financial software, and data collection and management and statistical analysis in social science tools.³ These sessions improved staff's reporting skills and evidence-based decision-making. With new laptops, tablets, mobile phone and internet packages, staff were able to work remotely and stay connected when their offices were destructed, or it was not possible to stay due to raging conflict in Sudan and Ukraine or when women were banned from work in Afghanistan. In some cases, new digital literacy skills staff's new professional opportunities after a project ended. To boost their outreach, CSOs also enhanced their digital presence by upgrading websites, refining social media content, and creating donation platforms.

Some produced radio broadcasts or advertised materials to better communicate their impact. Others made physical improvements such as remodeling offices, setting up safe spaces for female staff, or purchasing vehicles to improve staff's safety, reduce transport costs and ensure smooth operations in difficult environments. Some CSOs established partnerships with universities to support paid internships for students in their organization.

SUCCESS STORIES

A. [Centre Multidisciplinaire d'Appui pour le Développement de la Femme \(CEMADEF\), DRC](#)

With institutional support from WPHF, CEMADEF, a women-led CSO, launched several [innovative initiatives](#) that have strengthened both its internal resilience and community impact:

- The organization opened a grocery store offering essential products at affordable prices for the staff and their families allowing to improve their food security.
- Recognizing the emotional strain of operating in crisis settings, CEMADEF established a psychological and social support center for their staff which was then extended to the CSO target groups. Despite funding cuts and after the end of the WPHF's project, consultations are still provided at an affordable cost for staff and community members through a partnership with volunteer psychologists. By providing mental health services, the center has reduced staff's fatigue and stress and boosted overall team performance.
- In parallel, CEMADEF developed a digital microcredit system using M-Pesa, a mobile-based money transfer and micro -financing service, to support women's entrepreneurship. Grounded in mutual trust and solidarity, this initiative enables women to launch or expand small businesses by facilitating transactions between buyers and sellers, thereby enhancing their financial autonomy and access to essentials like food, education, and healthcare. Through its 'Global Access' platform, CEMADEF also extended this microcredit system to its staff members, simplifying repayment processes. All interest earned through the system is reinvested into the organization, reinforcing its sustainability.

2. See as an example WPHF CSO partner Borderless [offer of money generating programmes](#).

3. Such as [KoboCollect](#) and [SPSS](#).

B. [Syrian Youth Council \(SYC\), Syria](#)

WPHF's institutional funding allowed SYC, a youth-led CSO, to improve its organizational processes, positioning itself as a trusted organization for UN agencies. Through supporting salaries of female employees, newly developed internal policies and guidelines and staff training (e.g. in financial management, procurement, integration of people with disabilities etc.), SYC ensured that humanitarian efforts are structured and gender and disability inclusive. The improved Standard Operating Procedures and enhanced staff capacity enabled SYC to secure new partnerships with UNDP and UNICEF. They also helped build trust with entities such as banks, hotels, travel agencies and clinics, leading to the opening of a second center for youth vocational training after the center already operating in the Mediterranean coast city of Jableh, demonstrating SYC capacity for scale.

SYC conducted a survey to measure employees' satisfaction after implementing the institutional grant. 81% of staff reported improved performance from the new guidelines, and 75% found the training sessions effective, highlighting the success of these initiatives in boosting staff's morale and productivity.

"Core funding means real impact. In 2023, WPHF core funding enabled us to evolve from reactive survival mode to proactive strategic growth and rebuild the foundational pillars of our institution. This investment deeply impacted our operations, our people, and the communities we serve. We moved from informal practice to institutional clarity (...). Today, we are eligible for large-scale funding — we can apply for multi-year, higher-value opportunities that were once out of reach. (...) Rigid systems don't work in fragile contexts. Build trust-based funding models with room to adapt." — [Borderless](#), CSO partner from Lebanon (women-led and youth focused CSO)



LESSONS LEARNED

The following trends reflect the diverse and impactful efforts of CSOs in leveraging core funding to enhance their capacities, deliver effective programs and create systemic changes.

1

Strategic investment across multiple levels simultaneously —such as staff training, equipment acquisition, and organizational development— **significantly strengthens CSOs' governance and their ability to adapt** in volatile and rapidly changing environments. Because these elements are interconnected, improvements in one area reinforce others, collectively contributing to long-term organizational sustainability.

2

Prioritizing staff's well-being and safety is crucial to maintain teams engaged while working in challenging environments and to increase staff's performance, retention and the CSOs' capacity to deliver quality work. This is also important in a competitive environment where skilled staff are in high demand.

3

Core funding enables youth organizations to think strategically beyond immediate needs, developing and refining strategic plans, advocacy tools, and long-term visions that position young people as key actors in peacebuilding and humanitarian response. Ultimately, this strengthens their leadership role and unlocks new opportunities for youth-focused programming.

4

Investing in IT equipment and staff's digital skills enhances efficiency, accuracy, and time management across administrative, financial, and reporting tasks. It also enables the creation of remote workstations and strengthens staff's safety, ensuring operational continuity in insecure or disrupted environments while boosting staff's confidence, expertise, and overall organizational performance.

5

For youth organizations, digital tools and digital literacy skills translate into an enhanced online presence which improves reporting and broadens outreach, all critical for sustainability, credibility and attracting new funding.

6

Developing income-generating activities and investing in equipment powered by renewable energy strengthens CSOs' financial autonomy, reduces dependence on international donors, and diversifies funding streams.

7

Aligning internal systems and processes with international standards helps ensure more gender and disability inclusive governance in line with donor requirements, increase accountability and transparency and reduce fraud risks.

8

Entrusting local CSOs to define their own priorities including the use of core funding is essential to safeguarding their existence, especially in emergency contexts and amid today's global aid crisis.

9

Demonstrating the impact of core funding on CSOs' technical and operational capacities is essential to building donor confidence in flexible funding models. While many CSOs report increased success in securing additional funding thanks to institutional support, donor hesitancy persists around funding that is not tied to specific programmatic outputs, highlighting the need for stronger evidence and storytelling to shift funding practices.

CONCLUSION

Core funding has proven to be a catalyst for transformation enabling women-led and women's rights CSOs to move beyond project-based survival toward institutional resilience, innovation, and long-term impact. It has allowed organizations to retain skilled staff, prevent burnout, invest in digital and physical infrastructure, and align with international standards, all while remaining rooted in their communities.

It also leads CSOs to qualify to access larger grants, scale up or expand their interventions, and explore new areas of work. Core funding is also an opportunity to reposition their identity and value proposition. Finally, it enhances CSOs' credibility and strong reputation among the communities they serve, donors and local and national authorities.

In today's climate of shrinking civic space and escalating crises, flexible, multi-year core funding is not optional, it is essential. This is why flexible core funding opportunities need to be made available in multiple languages and digital formats for CSOs operating in hard-to-reach areas where civil society faces severe restrictions.

To ensure sustainable peace, effective humanitarian response, and inclusive development, donors must prioritize and expand access to core funding for local women's rights and women-led organizations. This is not just a matter of financial support, it is a commitment to local leadership, accountability, and lasting change.

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