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# Women’s leadership & movements

An overview of common models and approaches for supporting grassroots social change

**Localization and decolonization are increasingly important for international humanitarian and development organizations. These strategies confront the legacies from which many international organizations are built and the direction of their continued influence, interests and impacts globally through funding and initiatives.**

These discussions underscore the importance of supporting grassroots leadership and voices — particularly among those most impacted — to take collective action and catalyze change locally, nationally, regionally and internationally.

In 2022, the **CARE-WWF Alliance** set out to explore ways different organizations are specifically supporting women’s leadership in collective action and movement work, aiming to inform women’s leadership, livelihoods and climate change programs. CARE’s Global Gender Cohort carried out a mapping exercise on behalf of the Alliance.

This brief outlines the key models and recommendations identified for supporting women’s leadership.

## Models for supporting women’s leadership & movements

Different approaches support women’s leadership and movement-building via a diversity of relationships with participants and with a broader movement.

Common approaches identified through mapping models for supporting women’s leadership included:



**Participatory development projects** led by non-profits via grant funding



**Expert-led trainings** for leadership development and systems change



**Movement support organizations** that foster organizational leadership and development



**Membership-based organizing** and movement networks



**Transnational gatherings** for exchange and political education



## Participatory development projects led by non-profits via grant funding

**Participatory development projects** bring women together in groups at a very local level, often meeting weekly or bi-weekly for skill building, reflection, and action (e.g., awareness campaigns, collective negotiation and strikes for equal labor rights, community dialogues related to violence, etc.). This model is the basis for CARE's **Social Analysis and Action (SAA)** and Empowerment, Knowledge and Transformative Action (EKATA) models, ActionAid's **Reflection-Action** approach, Oxfam's **Gender Action and Learning System (GALS)**, and Raising Voices' **Start, Awareness, Support, Action (SASA)** approach. In it, key staff or partners of international organizations undertake a selection and recruitment process to form groups and facilitate interventions over a fixed period of two or more years. In some cases, these groups network with one another to offer a broader platform at the national level to advocate for common interests and issues (for example **VSLAs in West Africa** or **GROOTS Kenya**). Many examples use livelihood activities and group savings and income as the glue that enables women's consistent and sustained engagement. Non-profits typically organize activities around pre-defined sectors, objectives, logframes, and theories of change, with donor oversight and funding.



## Expert Training Services

A number of private consultants, training groups and educational institutions offer **paid certificates related to leadership and systems change**. These programs (**Forum for the Future, SusterA**) are fee-based and target professionals seeking to gain frameworks and skills to advance their work, bringing in expertise from various practitioners and academics. This work is demand-driven, as individuals/organizations pay to participate for this experience and certification.



## Movement support organizations

Another model identifies and supports **existing organizations, unions, and networks** rather than focusing on specific projects or participants. In these models, groups work with existing **organizations and leaders already involved in movement work**. The format of such support varies by initiative. **NDN Collective** and **Women's Earth Alliance** host fellowships, where select organizations gain access to trainings, networking, grants, and on-going technical support. **Just Associates (JASS)** was formed by an international network of feminist activists and academics, and supports rights organizations identified through their networks to engage research, training, and funding to women's human rights defenders. Organizations like **Movement Strategy Center, SisterSong, and CREA** are social justice organizations that develop and compile curricula to support movement work and feminist leadership, with a focus on campaign tactics and strategies.



## Membership-based organizing and movement networks

Broader membership-based networks work as more of a **community of practice or ongoing support mechanism for organized campaigns**. Operating in a tighter formation as a member-based network, the **Sunrise movement** supports wide-scale growth of local chapters that formed hubs to advance political mobilization and commitments with relation to climate change, job creation and the Green New Deal within the United States. Sunrise Movement is a youth-led movement that has grown to 336 hubs, 7000 members and over 233,000 email subscribers since 2017. It operates through a small national body of staff who support member chapters and hubs. These dense networks enable closely aligned media-friendly direct actions to amplify key messages in ways that gain **broad visibility to influence policy**. This has included sit-ins within government offices, noise demonstrations outside lawmaker homes, and supporting Global Climate Strikes, to draw attention to key issues and demands.



## Transnational gatherings and political education

While Sunrise movement is activated in the US and meets regularly, there are also **broader membership networks** like **Via Campesina, Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), Grassroots Global Justice, Berta Cáceres International Feminist Organizing School, and CREA** which have hosted periodic feminist leaders for exchange, learning and building solidarity internationally, sometimes alongside intergovernmental gatherings (e.g. International Climate Summits/COP, World Social Forum, etc.).

# Recommendations for supporting women's leadership and movements

A number of recommendations for supporting women's leadership emerged through reviewing these organizing models and analyzing women's leadership curricula:

## Organizational Governance and Accountability

- ➔ Take stock of **how projects and teams are structured** and how that fosters or undermines feminist leadership and accountability. Consider who drives the agenda, the extent to which implementing organizations are structured toward equity and local leadership, and what are the accountabilities to donors as well as community members.
- ➔ Acknowledge how **donor expectations and organizational hierarchies** within International NGOs can lead to contradictions while engaging movement organizations around the globe, potentially affecting trust and legitimacy with local stakeholders. Make plans for confronting these contradictions and shifting expectations to act as a better partner to liberatory movements. One critical step is to jointly articulate and commit to clear principles and expectations for each organization reflecting their relative influence, responsibility, and power.

## Considerations in Working with Women's Groups

- ➔ Support **spaces for participants' personal and collective self-reflection, aspirations, and group building**. These components were deeply valued by participants in the curricula reviewed as a means for women to ground and situate themselves in the work, both individually and collectively. These personal reflective spaces open powerful opportunities for redefining leadership in women's own lineages, histories, and values (see [We Don't Want to be Stars](#) and [CREA](#)). These spaces should explicitly include opportunities to reflect on gender norms, and their impact on women's participation and leadership (see [GALS](#) and [SASA](#)).
- ➔ **Power analysis exercises** are impactful ways for groups to reflect on their conditions, identify priority issues and develop ways to intervene in them (see [SASA](#)). In order to identify points of intervention and leverage, this should include clear reflections of local contexts, histories, practices/knowledge, and conditions, and local powerholders, as well as the ways that marginalized groups relate with them (and with one another).
- ➔ Support **self-determination, agency, and leadership of groups most impacted by injustices**. Advance equity, inclusion and leadership across age, disability, ethnicity/race, caste, gender and class.
- ➔ Any exercises working on and confronting powerful interests and inequities need to **clarify risks and mitigation measures**. This includes safety planning, as well as clear support networks for personal and collective safety. International organizations and funders supporting social/climate justice work and movements have a responsibility to adequately budget to support participant safety and ensure tools and procedures are in place to navigate other risks.
- ➔ Integrate practical sessions that **enable women to step into public participation**, such as group strengthening and solidarity, community-based accountability tools, and advocacy in public forums and decision-making.
- ➔ **Focus on addressing harmful norms and beliefs** that hinder women's participation and exclude marginalized voices and groups. CARE has recently published a [Social Norms Design Checklist](#) to support this area of work, which includes programmatic models like [SAA](#).
- ➔ Take the time to **build relationships, strengthen trust, and foster leadership development**. **Reflection-Action modules** took place over the course of at least two years before stepping into action. As groups form and run, however, there is power in connecting groups in the same municipalities or zones for exchange and identifying common priority issues that may collectively engage. These opportunities could also connect with other aligned movement actors and networks,

for broader coalition building around common campaigns and goals.



Work with women's groups should also **consider material needs, livelihoods, and equity**. Consider integrating mechanisms like Village Savings and Loan Associations and/or social funds that groups can maintain to support members' basic needs and/or through crises.

## Partnerships with movements



Map existing **networks and movement organizations that already center women's rights and leadership**, as well as the **movement support infrastructure** that strengthen them. Consider who supports organizations and their interests, who comprises them and their leadership, what are their values, principles and goals, and what relationships they hold.



Consider how international organizations will **reposition toward becoming more of a movement-support organization**:

- **Role:** Based on international organizations' strengths and resources, reflect on what international organizations offer to support women-led movements. For example, support roles may include hosting convenings and exchanges of movement organizations like **Via Campesina**, or helping foster and support women leaders of movement organizations to sustain their work and organizing (more similar to the fellowship models of **Women's Earth Alliance** or **NDN**).
- **Political analysis:** Locating proposed engagement in relation to existing political actors and campaigns can inform which movement organizations it makes sense to partner with and support.
- **Visibility:** In thinking about the types of movements and political organizing international organizations support, there will potentially be tensions regarding the donor or international organizations' own visibility and that of the movement, as well as navigating risks (reputational and otherwise). International organizations should have a clear stance on how their work centers movements and women's leadership over organizational brand recognition.



In partnerships, **reflect on organizational resilience, position, resources, networks, recognition, privilege, and potential consequences** across organizations. Engaging with movements also takes time to establish and deepen relationships, particularly with international organizations. International organizations should also acknowledge their own position (and often disproportionate access to resources) and take strategic risks as partners supporting justice goals and movements.

## Conclusion

Among the different models for supporting social movements, there are several **roles that international organizations can play in supporting grassroots social change**. Development non-profits have evolved practices to engage norms and power at households and community levels. However, fewer examples exist about how international organizations can equitably partner with and support women's leadership in movement-building — especially movements confronting powerful interests and institutions. Confronting these questions, however, requires deeper reflection and clear decisions on the (inherently political) positions that international organizations are willing to take in service of the vision and intent of such initiatives. Given the risks and vulnerabilities that movement organizations accept in confronting industries and powerful interests, international organizations must reflect critically on how they assess, mitigate and respond to risks as a true partner in solidarity with women leaders in grassroots movements.

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