

Spotlight on African Women's Development Fund

The African Women's Development Fund (AWDF), founded in 2001, is the first Africa-wide grantmaking foundation supporting women's rights organisations. It has developed a specialised mix of grantmaking, capacity building, and technical assistance, plus advocacy with a particular focus on support to small and medium sized organisations and marginalised groups of women. The Foundation's diverse range of funders include bilaterals such as Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Danida) and Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), public and private Foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ford Foundation and Comic Relief, plus increasing numbers of individuals. Its grantmaking work is divided into six thematic areas: 1) Women's human rights, 2) Economic empowerment and livelihoods, 3) Governance, peace, and security, 4) HIV/AIDS, 5) Health and reproductive rights, and 6) Arts, sports, and culture.

AWDF believes in the power and agency of African women and their organisations and a key part of its work is to promote the voices and views of African women in decision making spaces and influential platforms for action. Arts, sports, and culture have proven to be an important thematic area for its social justice work. For example, the Foundation worked with the Nigerian film industry (also referred to as Nollywood), to advocate for a change in how women are portrayed in film. According to Theo Sowa, Executive Director of AWDF, "one Nollywood film probably reaches more women on the African continent than any of our articles and publications would." AWDF also works with female African writers so that they can advocate more effectively for women's rights through their writing.

In its economic empowerment and livelihoods program, the Foundation focuses on funding smaller organisations, including women's cooperatives and HIV/AIDS support groups, many of whom have never had external funding. They also support women's agricultural groups seeking to improve agricultural practices to reduce dependence on seasonal crops or add value to them in order to increase or diversify income. For example, many organisations have applied for small grants to purchase capital equipment to process agricultural products (e.g. turning fresh cassava into gari, a dried starchy foodstuff). Other grants support small group enterprise development, while still others support macro level and policy activities, for example, supporting an organization to patent the work on financial inclusion of a network of women economic entrepreneurs. AWDF believes that economic security is one pathway to the achievement of a range of other women's rights, including physical security, political, cultural, and social protections and inclusion.

The Foundation provides reactive and proactive funding based on relevant issues and trends. Although AWDF does not specifically base its work on the MDGs, many of its thematic areas overlap with specific MDGs. For example, the Foundation used grant money from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs to fund projects working on achieving MDG 3—promoting gender equality

and empowering women. As part of its policy support work, AWDF also collaborated with the Economic Commission for Africa, UNWomen and African women's rights organisations such as FEMNET to help make African women's perspectives more prominent in the Post-2015 and the Financing for Development international agenda development processes.

AWDF recognises how important data is in its work, but highlights how much harder it has been to measure impact from grantmaking as opposed to implementation in social justice work. AWDF is currently revamping its information management system to make it more comprehensive and capable of better assessing trends and impact in more measurable ways. The Foundation is also aligning its data monitoring with its most important strategic outcomes. As part of this process, AWDF is working to improve the quality of data submitted by grantees in their mid-grant status reports. Reporting on progress and outcomes, as well as strengthening internal processes, has not been easy for many of the small grantee organisations with whom AWDF works, so the Foundation is providing them with training on results-based monitoring, resource mobilization, and financial management.

According to Theo Sowa, AWDF has been part of the success powered by women's rights movements in Africa and across the globe, which has seen gender equality given more attention and focus. When the MDGs were conceptualised and produced, gender equality was not very well thought out. By the time of the SDGs, however, there was greater consensus that women's rights needed to be at the forefront. Although the shift has been a real success for women's rights organisations and movements, women are still not as central as they should be when major policy decisions are being debated and made. It is not enough just to talk about women's inclusion, according to Sowa. The rhetoric around gender equality needs to be made real and should be reflected in funding trends. At present, that is not the case when it comes to the level of funding for women's rights organisations.

Says Sowa, "as a women's rights organization, we can make lots of grants, we can help influence legislation, and we can help promote the rights of women. But if women in the population do not actually know they have certain rights, or that certain legislation has been put in place – and as long as the world sees African women as victims instead of the power houses of change that we are - then we are not yet doing enough."



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Theo Sowa is an independent advisor and consultant, specialising in international social development with a particular emphasis on children's rights and protection issues. She is currently the CEO of the African Women's Development Fund. Her work includes advisory roles to African and other international women and children's rights activists and leaders, plus policy development and advocacy with a variety of international agencies and organisations. Theo is a trustee of Comic Relief (a multimillion dollar grant making foundation) and Chair of Comic Relief's International Grants Committee, a member of the African Advisory Board of the Stephen Lewis Foundation, a Patron of Evidence for Development, a member of the UBS Optimus Foundation, and a board member of the Graca Machel Trust.