



The Donor Committee for Enterprise Development

Fighting for Climate Justice: Empowering Women to Advocate on Climate Change Issues

Disclaimer

There is a dominant narrative that portrays women as victims of climate change. This brief is part of a series of examples that challenges this view, portraying women as active agents of change, in the hope of inspiring donors to advance women's economic empowerment to address climate change. Donor Committee for Enterprise Development (DCED) members helped the Canopy Lab team identify the women featured in the briefs as examples of innovation. We thank the women that generously shared their experiences with us.

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Introduction

Article 6 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change encourages the participation of **government, civil society and other stakeholders** in creating and implementing climate policies, to ensure that these policies are socially inclusive and just.

In addition, the International Labour Organisations' (ILO) **Guidelines for a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all** include the guiding principle that **"policies and programmes need to take into account the strong gender dimension of many environmental challenges and opportunities. Specific gender policies should be considered to promote equitable outcomes"**.









This brief explores projects working to support the participation of women, trans, and non-binary people in advocacy (in all arenas, from local to global), for the purposes of addressing climate adaptation, mitigation, and women's economic empowerment.

Advocacy includes, but is not limited to, political advocacy: the initiatives discussed in the case study involve support to grass-roots groups advocating for themselves through their day-to-day actions. In so doing, these groups expand the space for women, trans, and non-binary people in public spheres.



Empowering Women to Advocate on Climate Change Issues

This case highlights the determinants of success and lessons that women shared with the research team. Their experiences can serve as inspiration for the development of support packages from donors to similar women-led initiatives in climate change advocacy.

	URGENT ACTION FUND, ASIA & PACIFIC	PIFEVA, DRC
TARGETED RECIPIENTS	Groups that have applied for UAF grants (they range in size from just a few people to groups of 20-30)	Women, vulnerable people, and local communities
INCLUSION	HIGH (UAF supports intersectional groups, including marginalised groups) 	HIGH (Indigenous women, vulnerable women, children, youth, GBV survivors) 
POLITICAL ADVOCACY / EMPOWERMENT	HIGH (Support allows groups to continue national advocacy) 	MEDIUM (Socio-economic improvements, increased awareness of gender discrimination in the community) 
ENVIRONMENT	HIGH (Enables groups to adapt to negative effects of climate change) 	MEDIUM (Implementation of traditional Indigenous women practices to improve resilience) 
SUSTAINABILITY	HIGH (Grants enable human rights defenders to survive to carry on with their work) 	HIGH (Continuity of activities post-project) 

Participation of women, trans and non-binary people in national and global discussions on climate change

Human Rights

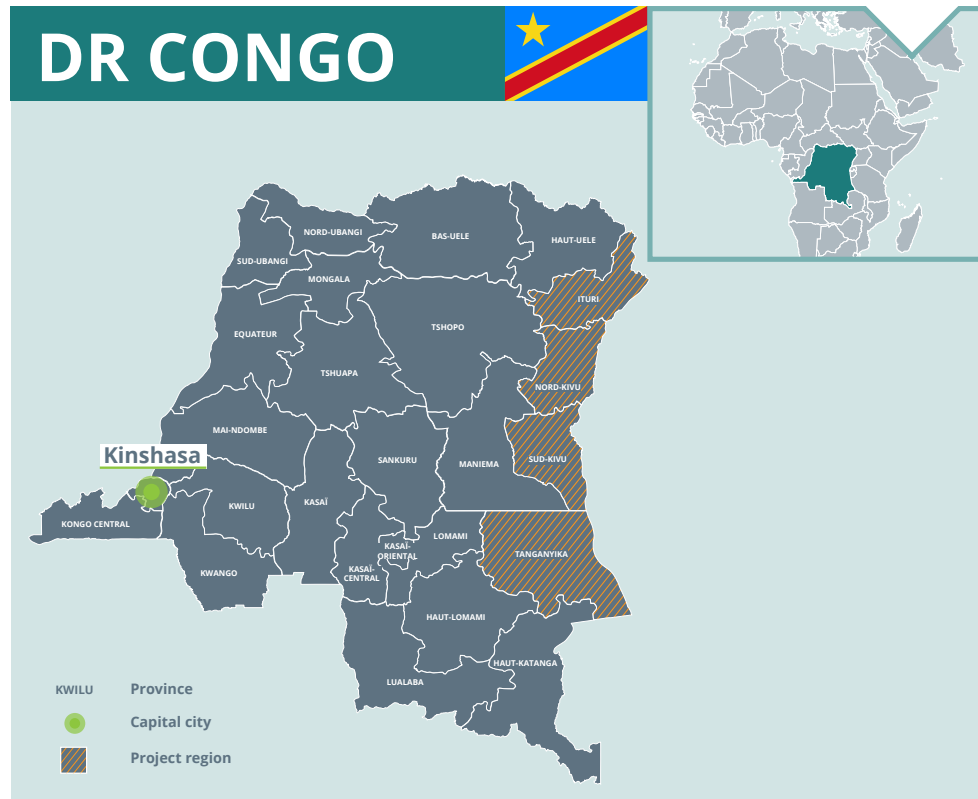
Climate Justice

According to UNWOMEN, **“gender inequalities, along with other social and economic inequalities, intensify vulnerability to climate change impacts ... Women and girls are more vulnerable to [climate-related] disasters, in terms of both the immediate impacts as well as their capacity to recover in the aftermath”**. Unfortunately, these existing gender inequalities and women’s unequal participation in decision-making processes often prevent them from fully contributing to climate solutions. However, women can and do play an important role as changemakers working to address the climate

crisis in decision-making fora: increasing women’s representation at **decision-making fora**: (be it at community or national levels, or internationally) leads to the adoption of more stringent climate change policies, resulting in lower emissions. In addition, **research has shown** that women adopt innovative and preventative measures faster than men: the presence and leadership of women in conservation and natural resource management platforms results in stricter and more sustainable extraction rules, greater compliance, more transparency and accountability, and better conflict resolution.



This brief presents positive examples from two donor-supported projects:



Project 1:

Urgent Action Fund¹ (UAF),

Asia and Pacific region, supported by Sida;

Project 2:

Pilier aux Femmes Vulnérables Actives

(PIFEVA)² in the Democratic Republic of Congo

(DRC), supported by **Women’s Environment and Development Organization (WEDO)**

which operates globally and is supported by Sida.

SIDE NOTE

1 “The Urgent Action Sister Funds are a global consortium of feminist funds that provide rapid and responsive support for women, trans, and non-binary human rights defenders in moments of need, sustaining feminist activism by supporting the resistance and resilience of frontline defender”. [Website](#) accessed in May 2024.

2 “A Congolese NGO supporting women and communities against poverty and injustice”. [Website](#) accessed May 2024.

Supporting human rights defenders in the Asia and Pacific region



**Ms. Vinita Sahasranaman,
Co-Lead of Urgent
Action Fund for Asia and
the Pacific region**

The Urgent Action Sister Funds are a global consortium of feminist funds that support feminist activism. The Urgent Action Fund for Asia and the Pacific (UAF A&P) started seven years ago. It is a rapid response fund to support women, trans, and non-binary human rights defenders who face threats and urgently need access to financial resources in small amounts, for example for physical and digital security.

The fund can also be used to seed catalytic opportunities such as enabling women's participation in global discussions. The fund is always open to grant applications in 11 languages, which are reviewed by Country Advisors. Funds are dispersed quickly to successful applicants. The research team talked to Ms. Nalini Singh, a UAF Country Advisor in Fiji,³ and to Ms. Vinita Sahasranaman, Co-Lead of UAF A&P.

SIDE NOTE

³ This was in lieu of an interview with grant recipients, due to security concerns around their safety if were they to participate in an interview.





INCLUSION

Inclusion of intersectional, self-selecting groups of advocates:

Ms. Singh, a UAF Country Advisor in Fiji, shared that groups that have received funds have included climate crisis vulnerable groups in remote areas, sex workers, those fighting for independence and democracy in their countries, and Pacific Islanders of Diverse Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, Expressions, and Sex Characteristics. These groups are formed prior to receiving a UAF grant, and they can range in size from just a few people to groups of 20–30. Groups receiving grants often reflect intersectionality. For example, they may work on climate issues and represent the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) community (see the example under environmental outcomes).

Design features that contributed to the outcome of inclusion: UAF grants respond directly to the



expressed needs of women, trans, and non-binary groups fighting the climate crisis and other threats to human rights in their country. In this way it acknowledges that these grassroots groups possess the know-how and are only lacking in monetary resources.

The Fund respects the language and self-determination used by the human rights defenders themselves, who self-identify as to which movement(s) they belong to. Embracing a participatory grant-making model, the fund welcomes applications from all people, except for cisgender men. Applications undergo a review by a network of over 150 country-based advisors such as Ms. Singh who provide endorsements grounded in their understanding of the applicant's work and local context. This decentralised approach ensures that grants are allocated based on grassroots insights and community needs.



**Ms. Nalini Singh,
UAF Country Advisor
in Fiji**



ACCESS

Supporting climate advocacy, at national and global levels:

Human rights defenders⁴ in receipt of UAF grants have been able to participate in global discussions. Defenders have also included labour rights groups addressing issues of workers' rights and economic empowerment, and women-led indigenous groups opposing extractive industries because of the industries' **significant negative impact on climate change**.

Design features that contributed to the outcome of advocacy: UAF grants support those groups fighting for independence and democracy in their countries.



These grants can be requested to seed catalytic opportunities such as participation in global discussions, by supporting groups to reach the tables where discussions are happening. Support for groups opposing the extractive industries has included grants for installing security devices, legal fees for lawsuits or false allegations, relocation and evacuation, wellbeing related issues such as psychosocial support, and living allowances. Ms. Singh says UAF's "medical and wellbeing fund is a blessing. For defenders experiencing burnout, it provides funds that they would not otherwise have access to in support of their mental and physical health, and forces them to prioritise themselves".

SIDE NOTE

⁴ UAF uses this term to refer to the people they support with their grants.



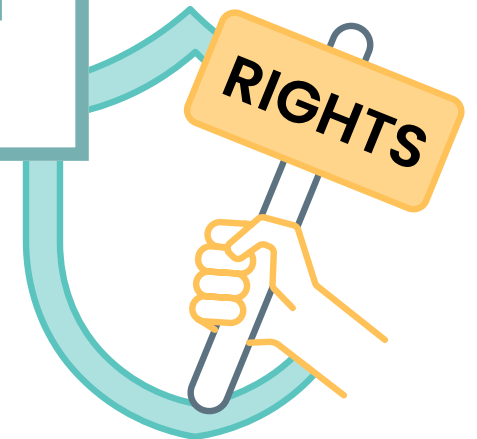


ENVIRONMENT

Environment: enabling climate adaptation:

Groups may receive a grant to cope with climate disasters, such as a sex workers' collective applying for climate resilience grant to deal with the aftermath of a cyclone or flood. These groups live on the fringes of communities, in areas prone to flooding – an increasingly frequent and unpredictable occurrence linked to the climate crisis, and they need the funds to survive. In these cases, a UAF grant is helping groups adapt to the damaging impacts of climate change.

Design features that contributed to the outcome of climate adaptation: UAF supports groups working on climate justice among other important human rights issues. The number of UAF grants going to environmental and climate justice defenders has been increasing year on year. Ms. Sahasranaman shared that "our 2023 grants exceeded the 2022 grants by 154%. And we gave it to defenders in about 18 countries in Asia and Pacific".





SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability beyond project completion:

The outcomes of UAF's grant are straightforward. They enable organisations and their members to survive climate crises, threats to safety and security, physical and mental illness, or operational shutdowns, so that they can continue to carry out their work defending human rights.

Design features that contributed to the outcome of sustainability: In addition to the types of grants described above, the Fund has also provided organisations with operational funds to allow them to continue their work. All UAF's grants are designed to address acute needs, so advocacy work can continue after the issue is addressed. Describing UAF's role, Ms. Sahasranaman asked to "think of us as the emergency room in a hospital".



Supporting women and children impacted by conflict and climate change in the DRC



**Ms. Bridget Burns, WEDO
Executive director**

PIFEVA (Pilier aux Femmes Vulnérables Actives en RD Congo) is a Congolese NGO established in 2004 to support indigenous women, victims of violence, vulnerable children, and local communities to fight poverty and injustice. Their vision is to empower vulnerable women and communities economically, socially, culturally, and politically.

PIFEVA focuses on various initiatives, including gender equality, women's rights, and climate change adaptation. PIFEVA is supported by the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) as a Gender Just Climate Solutions Scale (GJCS) Honoree and GJCS Scale Fund Recipient. The research team talked with PIFEVA's Coordinator, Ms. Véronique Bulaya, as well as with Ms. Bridget Burns, WEDO Executive Director.





INCLUSION

Inclusion of the most marginalised groups:

PIFEVA supports indigenous women, vulnerable women, children and youth, and women survivors of gender-based violence. These groups have taken ownership of projects initiated by PIFEVA, which according to Ms. Bulaya is an indicator of increased participation by these marginalised groups in finding solutions to climate and socio-economic problems.

Design features that contributed to the outcome of inclusion: PIFEVA has been focused on eastern DRC since 2004. The groups they support have and are being negatively affected by multiple wars, violence and displacement, poverty, malnutrition and hunger, and climate change.



PIFEVA brings to the fore the traditional knowledge that these groups possess and understands that they can be the architects of their own socio-economic and political advancement. Ms. Bulaya likens PIFEVA's role supporting the community to that of a banana tree pillar: „a banana tree is laden with its produce and leaves, but unfortunately is threatened by severe weather conditions (strong winds, infertile soil, erosion, etc.). In such circumstances, a tree pillar is used to support the banana tree, protecting it, and preventing it from falling over with all its produce“.





ACCESS

Women's economic empowerment – drawing on indigenous knowledge:

Indigenous women are significantly affected by climate change, as their livelihoods depend on natural resources affected by the climate crisis. For example, knowing that edible caterpillars play an important role as a source of protein and income for indigenous communities in the Mwenga region, but are affected by forest degradation, PIFEVA supported local communities to plant caterpillar host trees. This has had multiple benefits: addressing hunger and malnutrition, providing a source of income to indigenous youth and women, and addressing deforestation and restoring biodiversity.

Design features that contributed to the outcome of women's economic empowerment: PIFEVA led this experimental nature-based solution to restore biodiversity and bring back caterpillars as an



important food source. PIFEVA is also raising awareness within communities of practices that discriminate against women and girls, lobbying political decision makers to ensure women's rights and their access to land and natural resources. Through the Gender Just Climate Solutions (GJCS) Scale fund WEDO is redistributing funds directly to local grassroots groups such as PIFEVA. Ms. Burns says this is because "the [traditional] structures that have been put in place to try to finance and invest in climate action are not fit for purpose". Instead, WEDO's approach to providing support recognises that "a lot of the solutions that were happening at community level, were being led by informal groups or individual women's groups coming together in models that were challenging those existing traditional development models".





ENVIRONMENT

Environment: supporting climate resilience and climate advocacy:

PIFEVA's initiatives have empowered indigenous women to combat climate change through biodiversity restoration and sustainable forest management. Efforts in Mwenga have led to increased resilience. The organization's work has facilitated behaviour change, empowering rural and indigenous women to participate actively in climate action.

Design features that contributed to environmental and climate-related outcomes: PIFEVA treats indigenous women as agents of change who have effective traditional practices to combat deforestation, restore forest biodiversity and adapt agricultural practices.



In the last 10 years, PIFEVA has focused on: improving rural and indigenous women and girls' understanding of gender inequalities related to climate change, strengthening the networks of Congolese women affected by climate change, and advocating for mainstreaming gender into climate adaptation and mitigation policies in the DRC.

All of the above is in keeping with WEDO's systemic feminist perspective and its intention to "bring women together, grassroots women, and in particular Indigenous women, to be to have a voice in climate policy, both in the making and in the outcome of it" (Ms. Burns).





SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability of the project when funding ends:

PIFEVA's model has been replicated by other organizations in South Kivu in the DRC. Another project is now working on forest rehabilitation with women and girls, indicating its effectiveness and potential for scaling up.

Ms. Bulaya shared that the organisation always tries to carry on with activities even after donor support has ended, and that behaviour change and increased understanding by women and girls and their communities contribute to this.

Design features that contributed to the outcome of sustainability: Ms. Bulaya attributed the success and the geographical expansion of the NGO's activities to support from donors such as WEDO (supported by Sida), Global Affairs Canada, and UN Women among others.

The organization ensures continuity of activities post-project—they set up a system of ownership of the activities in agreement with the beneficiary groups, enhancing sustainability and long-term impact. Part of WEDO's criteria for the GJCS Scale Fund is that the funding will help the recipient organisation to grow, continue its work and become a more sustainable organization.



Lessons learned for donors, re-granting organisations, and project implementers

If you found the above inspiring, here are some suggestions for how you can design a project that will support women's economic empowerment and their participation in the public sphere—including in national and global discussions-on climate action:

- **Include explicit strategies targeting collective action and women empowerment alongside climate objectives:** Sida's global strategy emphasizes gender equality and women's rights, integrating them into development programming at policy and country levels. While not specifically targeting women's economic empowerment, it addresses discriminatory laws, social norms, and gender-based violence, recognizing the nexus between climate work and gender equality initiatives. This can be seen in UAF and WEDO's (both supported by Sida) support to groups working to end discrimination against women, trans and non-binary people, indigenous groups, and other marginalised groups while advocating for climate action and adapting to climate change.
- **Introduce decentralised, flexible, and responsive funding mechanisms that meet the needs of women, trans and non-binary people effected by climate change:** Sida is funding the UAF, guided by feminist principles and a commitment to crisis response with a collective care perspective. UAF does not prescribe activities, instead, it provides funds to help address the urgent needs of human rights defenders and environmental and climate justice defenders. Similarly, Sida funds WEDO, which in turn funds small organisations, like PIFEVA. WEDO is driven by its mission to support existing feminist initiatives, including those that provide climate solutions, to move power.
- **Promote bottom-up approaches and avoid imposing terminology on partners:** All the projects profiled here accept as their starting point that the communities they support already possess knowledge and expertise invaluable to addressing their socio-economic situation and the climate crisis. Instead of attempting to prescribe solutions, these projects prioritise community-led solutions, while supporting them, financially or otherwise, to amplify their work and their voices. Likewise, projects such as UAF do not impose categories or terminology on the human rights defenders and climate justice defenders they work with, instead recognising terms and movements with which the defenders identify.

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