

Partnering for sustainable Community-driven change

How the IGNITE model supported 86 feminist CSOs to deliver stronger community led response through equitable partnerships.



Funding pressure, protracted crises, protection risks, operational strain, and growing calls for locally-led action are forcing the humanitarian and development sectors to rethink how aid response is financed, delivered, and led. In practice, a shift from international non-government organization (INGO) delivery of programming to locally-led and owned programming has been slow; local Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), particularly feminist and women-led organizations, continue to receive less than 1% of humanitarian aid¹. When available, funding is often accompanied by compliance requirements and timelines designed for large international organizations, with limited adaptation to account for the size, capacities, and operating contexts of local actors, nor available investment in organizational capacity development so local actors can meet complex donor requirements. As a result, CSOs, despite their deep contextual knowledge and access to vulnerable populations, continue to be treated primarily as implementers rather than as equal partners.

Between 2023 and 2027, **IGNITE (Inspiring Girls and Grassroots Networks for Inclusive and Transformative Education)** aimed to address this challenge with support to 86 women-led CSOs across seven countries in Africa and the Middle East, with funding from the Agence Française de Développement. Led by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in partnership with Urgent Action Fund-Africa (UAF-A) and the René Moawad Foundation (RMF), the IGNITE Consortium combined feminist grant-making, capacity-sharing, and advocacy support to grow CSO capacities and enhance their sustainability in service of advancing gender-transformative education and shifting the gender-related social norms that hinder girls' participation in education. This brief captures the Consortium ways of working, what made IGNITE's unique model work, and what should be carried forward for peers designing or delivering similar equitable partnership models.



Three components, one model:

- Flexible feminist grant-making**, led by UAF-A and RMF, gives CSOs the opportunity to redirect budgets, extend timelines, and invest up to 50% of their grant towards organizational development.
- Mutual capacity-sharing and peer-learning**, which pairs diagnostic tools to identify priority needs with sustained one-on-one programmatic, advocacy, and organizational capacity strengthening accompaniment rather than one-off support.
- Advocacy and networking** that connects CSOs to decision-makers, peers, and platforms they would not have reached previously, turning organizational gains into policy influence and change.

¹ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/humanitarian-funding-cuts-threaten-womens-rights-whats-at-stake-and-how-to-help>

Our way of working: from transactional to equitable and trust-based partnership

IGNITE was based on six **feminist principles**: care, power-sharing, intersectionality, a girl-centered approach, sustainability, and collective voice; these were translated into **three ways of working**: power-sharing, co-creation and cross-learning.



At consortium level, our feminist principles were practiced through joint design and collective decision-making, starting from the very beginning of the project, rather than a top-down approach. IGNITE had to work through inherent power dynamics between a large international NGO and two regional partners, and to navigate shared responsibilities between the consortium and CSOs. IGNITE's experience shows that a feminist partnership approach takes time to build. As first-time partners, IGNITE consortium partners invested in a one-year inception phase in clarifying roles, building coordination mechanisms, and co-creating guiding documents. Building trust and effective ways of working require intentionality and sustained commitment, yet it ensures smooth implementation and ensures shared ownership and accountability.

93%

felt empowered in project decision-making

88%

felt their expertise was valued



At CSO level, the same principles shaped IGNITE's approach to partnership. The trust this approach required was sustained, not assumed. IGNITE combined a relational stance (guidance rather than imposed activities), a structural practice of safe, on-going and responsive feedback loops (grantee reports, reflection spaces, senior-management partnership visits) and organizational reflexivity: naming oversights and adjusting course against IGNITE's own feminist principles. CSOs consistently described the result as feminist, flexible and grounded in genuine project ownership.

\$80,577

Average grant over 15 months

The consortium moved from a **transactional approach to a more equitable partnership model** by recognizing feminist and women-led organizations as equal partners rather than simply implementers. This shift involved greater flexibility in funding and timelines, more meaningful participation in decision-making, and solid investment in organizational capacity and leadership through **1300 tailored accompaniment sessions**. Importantly, this trust-based approach did not mean compromising due diligence or accountability; rather, these processes were applied proportionately and with sensitivity to the capacities and contexts of local organizations.

90%

were satisfied with the partnership approach

73%

noted a significant impact on their organizational and programmatic capacities

93%

reported that their visibility and recognition have increased

From stronger CSOs to stronger communities: the impact on girls

IGNITE's core hypothesis was simple: better-resourced, better-equipped CSOs would translate into deeper, more sustained impact for adolescent girls. The same principles were carried into advocacy: co-created advocacy plans, tailored accompaniment and flexible budgets converted into direct reach: CSOs reached hundreds of thousands of community members through radio and social campaigns and one CSO successfully managed to get the Ministry of National Education in DRC to publish a Circular Note requiring pregnant teenage students to remain in schools. A decision that puts an end to a practice that, every year, pushed thousands of young Congolese women to leave school because of pregnancy.

What worked: a capacity-sharing model built to be replicable

IGNITE's capacity-sharing pillar combined organizational development (HR, governance, finance, M&E, safeguarding) with programmatic support (inclusion, education, advocacy), delivered through a mix of on-site workshops, one-on-one accompaniment and Communities of Practice that enabled CSOs to learn from each other. Four features made the model distinctive and worth replicating:

-  **Diagnose before you deliver.** A detailed **Organizational Capacity Assessment (OCA)**, implemented in Africa, enabled IGNITE to tailor its support to the specific gaps and priorities self-identified by CSOs, rather than relying on standardized, blanket trainings. By the end of the project, **62% of the gaps identified through the baseline OCA had been addressed.**
-  **Invest in sustained, hands-on accompaniment.** Long-term, individualized accompaniment, one-on-one support tailored to each CSO's context and pace was the strongest driver of lasting change helping them move beyond simply adopting a policy on paper to embedding it in their day-to-day practice.
-  **Organizational and flexible budgeting.** CSOs allocated up to **50% of their budget to their own organizational development**, investing in structures that will outlast the project and position them to reach new donors and take on larger projects in the future. The consortium also allowed budgets to be adjusted as needs evolved, whether driven by changes in context or by feedback from CSOs and the girls and adolescents they serve. This flexibility was only possible because of the trust built between consortium partners and CSOs.
-  **Networking and advocacy.** Through peer learning, the project fostered a sense of community among CSOs, both within countries and across countries and the region. CSOs described moving from isolated actors to feeling part of a community of peers working on similar issues, able to join forces for greater impact and stronger influence on policy. The IGNITE Forward, which brought together 45 CSOs from 5 countries and 40 donors, **gave CSOs the space to engage directly with donors and the private sector and to advocate for themselves**, with consortium partners opening doors and creating opportunities, rather than leading or speaking on CSOs' behalf.

The evidence is strongest where the model was applied most fully: in Africa, where two full-time experts delivered dedicated and OCA-grounded accompaniment over 18 months, **93% of CSOs reported a significant capacity gain and 81% were satisfied overall.** In MENA, a lighter-touch model, introduced later, without a full dedicated OCA, still delivered value (64% reported significant impact) but showed the ceiling of a shorter runway. While diagnosis and theoretical learning remain core components, it is the individualized hands-on accompaniment over several months that drove shifts in organizational systems and programmatic practices.



The advocacy component was complemented by a research component: six CSOs led research on girls' and adolescents' access to school and the social barriers they face, with some also researching gender-based violence. This evidence was used to shape advocacy messages and inform policy. Of these six CSOs, four were selected to present their findings at the SVRI 2026 conference, illustrating the shift from local research to international influence.

5 CSOs received a Research & Advocacy grant

57 advocacy plans

13 policy briefs

Lessons learned: what should inspire actors supporting WLOs

True to IGNITE's commitment to organizational reflexivity, the consortium also reflected critically on where its approach fell short of CSOs' needs. Several lessons stand out:

-  A single curriculum could not adequately serve both nascent Seeds grantees and more established Scale-up organizations: several CSOs, particularly in MENA, found the training content too basic to add real value at their stage of development.
-  Timing and pacing also need to be reconsidered. The capacity-sharing programme only began midway through project implementation, by which point several trainings would have been more useful earlier on. This was compounded by a bottleneck in the final months, when many activities were offered in quick succession that prevented CSOs full attendance.
-  Certain trainings, notably on safeguarding and donor compliance requirements (finance and procurement), should have been mandatory from the outset, to ensure CSOs' compliance from day one without overburdening them later in the process.
-  Finally, the Organizational Capacity Assessment (OCA) used to gauge CSOs' starting point focused primarily on core organizational functions, without systematically assessing safeguarding or programmatic capacity, leaving gaps in these areas that only became visible later in implementation.

Getting the Design Right from the Start

- >>> Budget and staff for accompaniment duration explicitly.
- >>> Build a tiered, mandatory learning offer. Do not assume experience with girls' programming means CSOs already have strong safeguarding or inclusion practices.
- >>> Embed advocacy and networking in the budget from the start, rather than retrofitting them once a project is underway.
- >>> Extend the OCA's scope to safeguarding and programmatic areas, not only core organizational functions.

Partnership practices worth repeating

- >>> Start accompaniment before the grant is signed, so trust and capacity-sharing begin ahead of the funding relationship.
- >>> Make feedback loops structural, routine and acted upon, not just on paper.
- >>> Agree consortium roles and risk tolerance explicitly between international and regional partners.
- >>> Facilitate spaces for CSOs to mentor each other, some of the most credited shifts in practice came from CSO-to-CSO exchange, not IGNITE-delivered content.

The bigger picture

This model shows that success should be measured not simply by the funds channeled, but by the extent to which the consortium shifted from a donor role that set priorities to one that enabled CSOs to advance their own priorities and whether CSOs emerged more capable, connected, and credible on their own terms. The model relies on sustained accompaniment time that is easy to under-budget, and on equal partnership built at two levels: among consortium members, and between the consortium and CSO grantees, with risk and compliance burden shared deliberately across both rather than left for CSOs to bear alone. None of this made trust a substitute for due diligence as this model should calibrate compliance requirements to each CSO's size and maturity. Within those limits, it offers a replicable answer to what it takes to make localization feel like equitable partnership rather than service delivery: **let CSOs self-diagnose their own priorities, fund accompaniment for its full duration, and start trust-building before the grant is signed.** Knowing that scaling this model will depend as much on donors evolving their compliance requirements as on consortium practice. Localization, in the end, is not a line item; it is a posture a consortium must choose to hold.

Want to know more?

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