



Coalition and Co-Creation Approach with Women's Rights Organizations

Scaling Care Innovations in Africa
Learning Brief

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Introduction

Efforts to recognize, reduce, and redistribute unpaid care work are fundamentally linked to gender equality. Women's rights organizations (WROs) bring expertise in gender equality and women's economic rights, as well as knowledge of women's lived realities, relationships with communities, and experience translating these priorities into advocacy and policy engagement. Meaningfully involving WROs in care initiatives can therefore help ensure that research, policies, and programs respond to women's priorities and address the gender inequalities that shape unpaid care work.

The [Scaling Care Innovations in Africa \(SCIA\)](#) program, co-funded by the International Development Research Centre and Global Affairs Canada, was designed with WRO participation as a core feature of its approach. Partnership with a WRO was a mandatory requirement under the SCIA call for proposals, ensuring that WROs were embedded in every project coalition from the outset. Across its 19 projects in 15 countries, these coalitions brought together WROs, research organizations, governments, and other actors to combine complementary expertise and connect evidence, implementation, and advocacy. The SCIA program also invested dedicated resources in co-creation, enabling coalition partners to jointly refine projects, clarify roles, and build shared ownership before implementation.

This brief draws on evidence and learning from across the SCIA portfolio to examine how coalition-building and co-creation with WROs have worked in practice, highlight the value these partnerships can bring, and distill practical lessons for designing future coalition-based initiatives and equitable partnerships. Experience across the SCIA portfolio demonstrates both the value of this approach and the importance of how WRO participation is structured in practice. Including a WRO as a coalition partner does not automatically result in meaningful participation or equitable partnership: governance arrangements, decision-making power, resources, role clarity, and relationships all shape how effectively coalitions operate.

How Were Coalitions Designed and Implemented?

Coalition Composition and Partner Roles

While all SCIA projects follow a common coalition model, the composition of coalitions and the roles of partners vary depending on the intervention, policy context, and existing

relationships. Coalitions typically bring together WROs, research institutions, governments, international non-governmental organizations, and/or civil society organizations, with each partner contributing complementary strengths. Research institutions generally lead implementation research and evidence generation; WROs contribute contextual knowledge, trusted community relationships, and advocacy and coalition-building expertise; and government and other implementation partners help connect project learning to institutional frameworks, budgets, and services.

WRO roles vary considerably across projects. In four projects, WROs serve as lead organizations, balancing implementation and stakeholder engagement while placing particular emphasis on advocacy and policy influence. In other coalitions, WROs contribute primarily through project design, coalition-building, community engagement, evidence generation, and advocacy, rather than leading day-to-day implementation. In contrast, coalitions led by non-WRO organizations tend to place greater emphasis on implementation, monitoring, and coalition management, with less direct engagement in policy and advocacy. When these complementary roles are clearly defined and partners' diverse expertise is recognized and valued, coalitions report greater relevance to local needs, stronger ownership among partners, and better positioning for policy engagement and scaling.

Case Study: WROs as Connectors Between Community Evidence and National Policy

The [*Coupling Unpaid Care Domestic Work with Local Development Agenda for Improved Care Systems in Ethiopia*](#) project brought together the Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations (NEWA) (a WRO), the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs (government partner), and research partners to generate and translate evidence on unpaid care and women's economic empowerment into policy dialogue.

Drawing on its relationships with women traders and caregivers, NEWA helped identify priority care issues and shape research questions and tools around women's lived realities. Importantly, its role extended beyond connecting communities with policymakers. NEWA established a technical working group that brought together representatives from several government ministries, including Women and Social Affairs, Labour, Education, Water, and Health. This cross-sector coalition helped position unpaid care not only as a gender equality issue, but as an issue with implications across social protection, economic participation, and public service delivery.

The coalition also provided a pathway for translating research into existing government systems. The project contributed technical evidence toward updating Ethiopia's long-standing gender mainstreaming guidelines, with the aim of integrating care as an intersectional gender issue. This recognized that women experience care responsibilities differently depending on factors such as class, ethnicity, religion, and location. The project complemented this work with valuation research estimating that unpaid care and domestic work contribute approximately 17–22% of Ethiopia's GDP, including analysis across the country's 12 regional states. Policy briefs translated this evidence into accessible arguments about the economic value of care and approaches for measuring it using existing time-use data and National Transfer Accounts methodology.

NEWA combined community relationships, gender expertise, and policy networks while convening actors across traditionally separate government sectors. In doing so, the coalition created a shared evidence base and policy entry point through which unpaid care could be understood as an intersectional, economic, and cross-sector development issue rather than the responsibility of the gender machinery alone.

Coalition Structures and Governance Arrangements

Coalition governance arrangements were typically established at the proposal stage and continued to evolve as projects moved into implementation. Coalitions combined formal meetings with more flexible forms of coordination, including WhatsApp groups, email exchanges, calls, and joint reflection sessions. This relationship-driven approach enabled partners to adapt their ways of working to emerging needs and changing contexts.

Experience across projects also highlighted the value of periodically revisiting and formalizing governance arrangements during implementation as coalitions evolve. In several cases, partners developed or strengthened memoranda of understanding and internal agreements during implementation to clarify roles, responsibilities, and decision-making processes. These experiences suggest that effective coalition governance benefits from both flexibility in day-to-day collaboration and clear, shared agreements that can be reviewed and refined over time.

Co-creation as a Mechanism for Coalition Work

Beyond determining who participated in the coalitions and the roles they played, SCIA's coalition design also emphasized how partners worked together. Co-creation was intended

to provide a structured process for partners to jointly shape projects, clarify roles, and build shared ownership from the outset. This emphasis on co-creation is a defining feature of SCIA's coalition model. Recognizing that meaningful collaboration requires time and resources, IDRC provided project development funding to support a dedicated co-creation phase from the outset. This enabled coalition partners to jointly develop proposals, plan activities, co-design research tools, clarify roles and responsibilities, and engage in shared reflection throughout the process.

What Value Did Coalitions Create?

Coalitions helped generate evidence that was more relevant to the realities of women, caregivers, and communities. By bringing together partners with different skill sets, expertise, and perspectives, coalitions also helped ensure that the evidence generated in the project moved beyond the research process and was translated into messages and actions that could inform community engagement, care service delivery, and policy dialogue.

This collaborative approach also strengthened implementation and stakeholder engagement. WROs helped coalitions reach women and caregivers, understand local priorities, and build trust around care interventions, while government partners helped connect project learning to existing systems, services, and decision-making processes. Across the portfolio, these relationships helped partners adapt activities to local contexts and created stronger pathways for evidence to inform policy and practice beyond individual research activities.

Case Study: Co-Creating Evidence Through Photovoice to Bridge Lived Experience and Policy

The [*Sharing the Motherload: Engaging Fathers and Other Key Stakeholders to Transform Gender Policy and Foster Care Economies*](#) project operated within a coalition that brought together Flourish (a WRO), the University of Cape Town (UCT) (a research partner), School of Hard Knocks (community-based partner), and the Western Cape Government.

Each partner brought a distinct contribution to connecting lived experience, research, and policy. Flourish and the School of Hard Knocks connected the research team with low-income communities, enabling the project to center their voices and lived realities. Flourish identified and engaged low-income mothers whose unpaid care work was largely

invisible in policy discussions, while the School of Hard Knocks facilitated engagement with fathers. Through photovoice, participants documented and reflected on their experiences of unpaid care work using photographs and narratives. The UCT provided the research and evidence base using photovoice, a participatory method that positioned the low-income mothers and fathers not as research subjects but as experts in their own lives. The Western Cape Government connected the coalition to relevant policy and regulatory processes and helped create pathways for translating findings into policies and programs.

The project's insights have had a transformative impact across the coalition. Flourish revised its maternal support model after recognizing that user fees placed an unfair burden on households, moving to a fully subsidized approach that provides free antenatal and postnatal classes and support networks for women nationwide. *The Motherload* is now integrated into its curriculum.

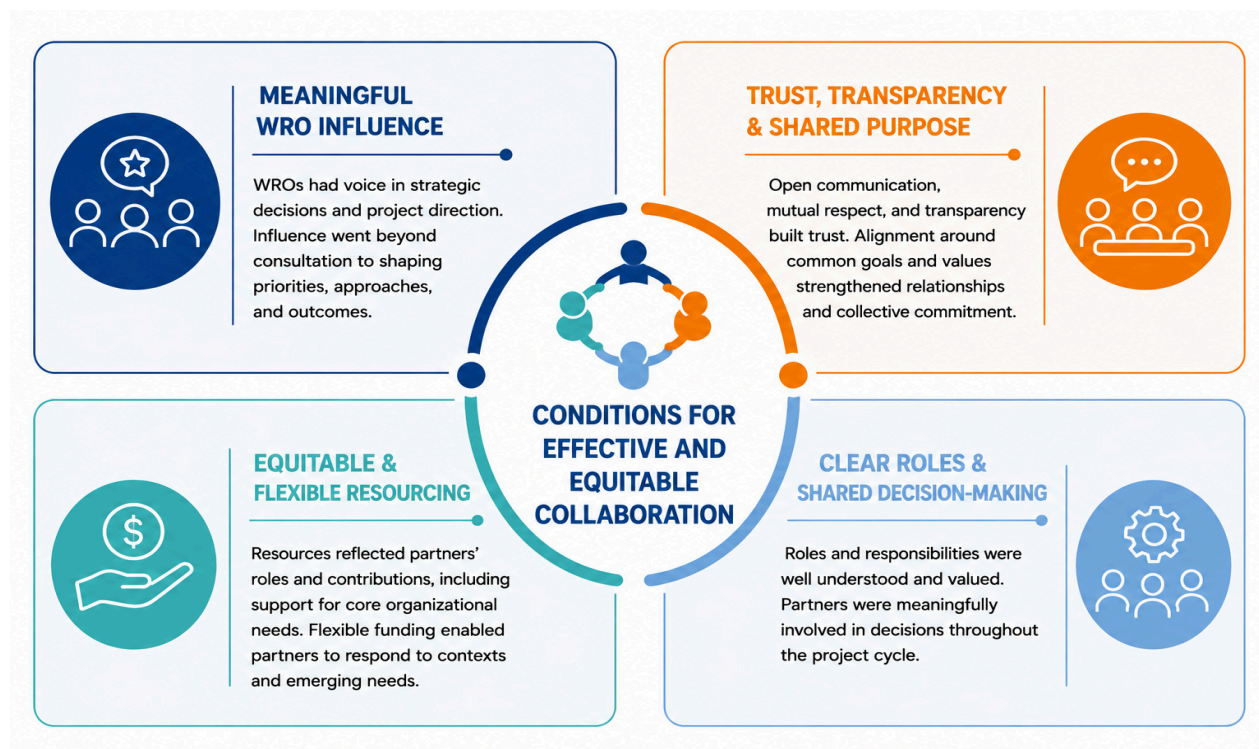
The UCT research team partnered with the School of Hard Knocks' NxtGenSchools program to develop a four-part curriculum for Grades 7–9 that challenges harmful gender norms. The program has been rolled out in six low-income schools to date, reaching more than 1,000 students. The project has also influenced policy discussions by bringing women's lived experiences into government spaces and using research evidence to inform more responsive care policies and programs in the Western Cape.

Coalition participation also created opportunities for reciprocal learning and organizational strengthening. WROs reported gaining experience in research methods, data collection and analysis, financial and operational systems, and evidence-based advocacy. At the same time, research institutions and other partners benefited from WRO expertise in gender analysis, participatory approaches, community engagement, and policy influencing. By connecting organizations and networks around shared care objectives, coalitions also strengthened the broader care ecosystem, creating connections between evidence, advocacy, lived experience, and policy engagement.

What Enabled Effective and Equitable Collaboration?

Several conditions shaped how effectively and equitably the coalitions worked together. Experience across projects suggests that WRO inclusion alone did not necessarily translate into equitable partnership. Collaboration was stronger when WROs had meaningful

influence in decision-making, when each partner's role and contributions were clearly recognized, when resource allocation reflected the responsibilities partners were expected to assume, and when relationships were grounded in trust, transparency, and shared purpose. These conditions helped move WRO participation beyond representation toward more substantive partnership.



Implications for Future Coalition-Based Programming

Experience from the Scaling Care Innovations program offers several lessons for the design of future coalition-based programs involving WROs. In particular, it highlights the importance of moving beyond requirements for WRO participation toward creating the conditions for meaningful influence, equitable partnership, and sustained collaboration throughout implementation.

Design equitable coalitions and co-creation processes from the outset and revisit them over time

Coalitions should be designed with WROs from the beginning. During inception, partners should jointly refine project priorities, clarify the value each organization brings, and formally agree on how decisions will be made. Early investment in these processes can build shared ownership, identify potential tensions, and establish a foundation for collaboration. Governance arrangements should also be revisited periodically as projects

evolve, allowing partners to clarify changing roles, responsibilities, and decision-making processes.

Support meaningful WRO participation throughout implementation

WRO participation should extend beyond early project design, grassroots engagement, and dissemination. Future initiatives should create regular opportunities for WROs to contribute to research design, analysis, and decisions about evidence use. This helps ensure that co-creation remains an ongoing practice and that WRO knowledge informs both project delivery and pathways to advocacy and policy influence.

Resource coalition governance, learning, and capacity strengthening

Coalitions need dedicated resources for coordination, governance, joint reflection, and relationship-building, including recognition of the time and expertise WROs contribute. Learning and capacity strengthening should also be reciprocal, supporting WROs' organizational and technical priorities while enabling research institutions, governments, and other partners to learn from WROs' expertise in gender analysis, participatory approaches, community engagement, and policy influencing.

Learning Brief Information

This brief was prepared by Leva Rouhani and Kate Grantham of [FemDev Consulting](#). It draws on evidence and learning from the SCIA Mid-Term Review Report and a survey of participating WROs conducted by IDRC, supplemented by project-level evidence and learning from across the SCIA portfolio.

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