



Increasing visibility and impact in the face of insecurity

Fonds pour les Femmes Congolaises

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- › **Case study focus:** Resilience Grant
- › **Participation in collaboration groups:** Participatory Feminist Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning
- › **Country:** Democratic Republic of Congo
- › **Region:** Central Africa
- › **Type of fund:** National
- › **Size of fund:** Upper mid-size
- › **Fund programmes:** Sexual and reproductive health and rights, climate change and environmental protection, women's political participation and leadership, sexual and gender-based violence, financial autonomy of women and girls, conflict management, and transformation

Executive summary

This case study tells the story of the women's fund Fonds pour les Femmes Congolaises (FFC), **a national feminist fund working across the Democratic Republic of Congo**, with offices in Goma, Kalemie, and Kinshasa. A myriad of challenges hamper the fund's field work and presence, including national and regional contexts of insecurity and violence, an unreliable electricity grid and computer system, and the fact it is a French-speaking fund existing in a predominantly English-speaking funding ecosystem.

However, thanks to the support of the Fenomenal Funds' Resilience Grant, the fund has been able to build its strength and resilience in the face of such obstacles. The financial resources provided by the Resilience Grant supported FFC in strengthening itself internally—by enhancing the safety and security of its offices, team, files, and resources—which cemented its presence in the feminist ecosystem and allowed it to better work with and monitor its partners.

In addition, the collaboration with and within Fenomenal Funds helped pave the way for FFC to engage with new partners outside its region and language, which led to new funding opportunities that enhanced the sustainability of the organization.

FFC also invested in building the capacity of its team by engaging in the Participatory Feminist Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning collaboration group, which offered training in communications work, finance and resource mobilization, and self- and collective care—leading to an increased sense of confidence among the fund's members.

The example of FFC demonstrates the usefulness and impact of a flexible grant on a feminist fund working in a volatile context. For FFC, in-house investments have had the decisive effect of strengthening not only its own resilience, but also that of its partners.

The focus of FFC

FFC is the 'only women's fund in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) providing financial and technical support to grassroots organizations run by women and girls'. To date, the fund has supported 623 projects across 16 provinces in the DRC, through six major programmes: sexual and reproductive health and rights, climate change and environmental protection, women's political participation and leadership, sexual and gender-based violence, financial autonomy for women and young girls, and negotiation of peace and peaceful cohabitation.

Specifically, the fund targets gender issues across generations (girls, women, and older women), internally displaced girls and women and girls in displacement camps, and people living with disabilities. These targets require them to work flexibly, with close monitoring in the field and online. Fieldwork is essential for FFC due to the lack of technological resources among its target groups; the realities of political insecurity, such as the presence of armed groups; and the sensitivity of its focus issues, such as gender-based violence.

Introduction

Fonds pour les Femmes Congolaises (FFC) operates in an unstable context with many obstacles—including poor security and safety, a large-sized country, and an unreliable internet connection—which limit access to its partners. The fund also faces language barriers, which separates it from the predominantly English-speaking feminist ecosystem.

Here, we explore how, with the aid of the Resilience Grant, FFC was able to dedicate resources to:

1. **Strengthening its working conditions**, especially around the safety, security, and reliability of its work, and **in the culture and practices of care**;

2. **The technical skills** of its team (especially in finance, communications, and feminist monitoring);
3. **Expanding its network of** collaboration and resource mobilization;
4. **Enhancing support to its partners** by ensuring field visits, being flexible in its work, and offering better assistance through improved internal capacity building.

The case study concludes with reflections on FFC's experience of resilience and how this is shared with those it supports. Finally, we present FFC's reflections and its plans for the future.

Uses and effects of the Resilience Grant

Investments to improve safety and working conditions

FFC operates in a context of socio-political insecurity. It works in Goma, Kalemie, and Kinshasa—three remote towns which have severe access limitations to electricity and the internet, as well as poor means of transportation, which restrict the FFC team from performing fieldwork.

To improve working conditions and allow the fund to better monitor projects, its members decided to invest part of the Resilience Grant funding in computers that have high-capacity batteries and can remain connected to the network.

This investment in technology allows the team to work continuously throughout the day and enables them to conduct follow-up work without necessarily having to travel to the field. In Kalemie, for example, the team may experience a 10-day power cut—but the new technological tools allow them to navigate this, leading to much less stress.

Funding from the grant also assisted FFC in purchasing vehicles that would enable its members to travel safely to visit programme participants and better monitor those they support. It is now much easier for the FFC team to organize field visits; for example, when a partner launches a new programme. The funds have additionally helped FFC pay for a security service to keep the office and staff safe.

The organization also used money from the Resilience Grant to invest in its team's health and wellbeing.

For the first time, FFC brought together colleagues from Goma, Kalemie, and Kinshasa for a retreat, during which they worked on strategic issues alongside collective and self-care. It was the first time that staff from the three offices had met in person; before, they only saw each other by video conference.

"[The retreat] brought us closer together," shared one member. Three sessions dedicated solely to self-care were organized with an online consultant, and these had "a lot of effects on the whole team," the fund revealed. One member explained that **"what we see in our work traumatizes us. Work can**

make us sick.” Therefore, the exercises they learnt were “crucial”, and the members can now engage in these individually whenever they feel stressed or depressed. With the support of the Resilience Grant, self-care is “a new habit we’ve made our own,” shared one member—and the team is keen to experience “more opportunities like this”.

Through the Resilience Grant, FFC members have also been able to take part in activities within Fenomenal Funds—such as collaboration groups and meetings organized for all the participating women’s funds, allowing for them to expand their network both in terms of collaborations but also for fundraising.

Internal capacity building to optimize work processes

With the support of the Resilience Grant, FFC strengthened its internal capacity by securing the full-time employment of some team members, such as the colleague in charge of resource mobilization.

Funds earmarked for specific projects tend to only cover the costs of staff directly tied to the project, while overlooking the need for staff who provide, for example, administrative services in the organization. As such, prior to the Resilience Grant, several FFC staff who were not attached to a specific project could not be guaranteed a full-time job or decent salary.

The fund also invested in new IT tools and staff training for their use—such as accounting software and updated archiving systems, including Dropbox. The accounting software significantly facilitates the fund’s work, providing faster processes, easier audits, and the ability to submit reports with clear results to partners and donors. “[Now], we have better control over our information systems,” one member shared. Meanwhile, the Dropbox training helped the team to better manage their documents and interconnect internal files, making their work more flexible.

Team members in charge of communications also received vital training in communication and videography, learning how to create and edit videos comprising their own photos. As the fund works with

small organizations in remote areas, the photos its members take or receive are often of lower quality. However, their newfound knowledge means they are better able to process images, transform them into interesting videos, and share them with partners to expand donor and collaboration bases.

The new softwares have also strengthened the traceability mechanisms for the fund’s work. It is now easier for the fund and its donors to see how the money the organization receives goes directly to those it supports, and it is also at less risk of losing money and critical information (such as photos or videos). Since these improvements, donors have expressed their appreciation to the fund for the transparency of its work.

Although these investments targeted a few specific departments—resource mobilization, finance, and communications—they have resulted in a more fluid and interconnected way of working within the overall organization.

Creating new connections

Fenomenal Funds’ non-competitive environment, described as “innovative” by FFC members, gives confidence to participating funds by creating a space where they feel they are on an equal footing with sometimes more established funds. Participating in the initiative opened up new avenues for FFC to engage in exchanges with other women’s funds and develop its network. For example, with their new computers, FFC members consistently and effectively participate in discussions within its collaboration group, as well as with other Fenomenal Funds stakeholders. As one FFC member stated:

“We got to know each other over time. The lack of competition allowed [us] to see the collaboration as an ‘adventure of exploration’, where there was the luxury of being flexible and learning how to adapt to the needs of others (time zones, language barriers, workloads).”

When they can, FFC uses the grant to engage face-to-face with the grantee partners that it is working with in the context of its activities in the Participatory Feminist Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning collaboration group. Meanwhile, for another group activity, FFC members were able to meet in Goma with their grantee partners, a trainer (who spoke English), and online interpreters, to receive training in feminist monitoring and evaluation. These experiences showed FFC that **language should not be a barrier for them or its grantee partners**. Using new learnings from the communication training, the fund relayed its experience in Goma on social media—resulting in positive media coverage and FFC receiving messages from embassies and donors in appreciation of their work and flexibility.

As a French-speaking fund, FFC doesn't have access to the same funding opportunities as English-speaking funds. "It's not easy for a French-speaking feminist fund to access funding," noted one FFC member. "The world of donors is located in the English-speaking world, so it's a problem."

During organized conference sessions, for example, donors are English-speaking and each participant receives interpretation. But, outside these, it's difficult to communicate with partners—and, even when interpreters are available, a lot can get lost in translation. However, since its involvement with Fenomenal Funds, FFC has been working to reduce these barriers by enrolling its members in English language courses and expanding its staff with bilingual personnel.

The fund is also working to reduce socio-cultural barriers by learning about different women's funds and the contexts in which they operate. As part of this, FFC's director used some of the Resilience Grant to carry out resource mobilization missions and learn how to talk to donors and strengthen the fund's capacity to secure new donations. As a result of these efforts, **FFC has already secured funding from a new donor**.

Finally, FFC used some of the Resilience Grant to fund its participation in the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW) in 2024, which was "a great experience where we made

a lot of changes and met new potential partners." For this, the fund organized a panel, during which it presented its achievements and requirements (as well as those of the women it works for)—and invited some of the donors and partners it works with to attend. Despite language limitations, there was a lot of interest among attendees, and the fund shared reports and flyers with its contact details to encourage further connections.

Transferring resilience to partners

For FFC, the Resilience Grant came "at a time when it was needed." The COVID-19 crisis highlighted some organizational failings within the fund—and, as the grant was awarded strictly for institutional strengthening, it used some of the money to finance programmatic activities and meet certain priorities regarding its institutional needs. This internal strengthening has allowed the fund to become more flexible in meeting the needs of its partners.

Enhancing capacity represented a crucial moment for FFC in its field work and support for its partners and women.

The fund insists on transferring both knowledge and resilience to those they support in the field. "The fact that we got closer [to the women] during these difficult times increases the women's confidence in our fund," one member shared. "It creates a sense of resilience; they understand that, despite the difficult context, we must continue to fight for women's rights."

In regions where there are armed groups, it's easy for women to give up on the situation and become passive—due to fear of violence, for example—so FFC specifically targets them with support to break this state. As a result of the team's efforts, the fund has seen the **women gain confidence in their role as agents of change**. "When they see us doing things, when they see the risks we take by going to meet them in risky areas, they also want to get involved," said one FFC member. For example, with FFC support, the women lobbied against companies that want to build a dam—a construction which risked escalating friction and violence in the area—and

raised awareness among men in armed groups to convince them to return to civilian life. In one region, the actions of these women led to 13 men leaving armed groups.

This is FFC's aim: to secure and strengthen itself internally so it can successfully transfer resilience directly to the smallest organizations and women who will make real change possible.

Conclusions

The Fenomenal Funds Resilience Grant contributed to enhancing the resilience of FFC by providing it with opportunities to:

- **Initiate institutional changes**, so it can better adapt to unpredictability and become more secure as an organization, both internally and externally, and increase its focus on care issues;
- **Strengthen its internal capacities** by investing in the skills of the team and the care of its members;
- **Expand relationships in the feminist ecosystem** beyond its geographical region and French-speaking partners;

- Develop a **closer relationship with its recipient partners** through the transfer of resilience.

For FFC, the Resilience Grant presented an opportunity to address its most pressing needs in a context of insecurity, triggering a dynamic process of internal reinforcement and transfer of resilience to its partners.

It also afforded them scope to invest in vital material needs (cars, computers, caretaking services) and immaterial needs (self-care, face-to-face visits, learning sessions, participation in resource mobilization events), all of which help ensure the fund's continued partner support.

What are the next steps for FFC?

FFC reveals that working with Fenomenal Funds "opened up a different way of looking at" its activities, its partnerships, and its sector. With an enhanced sense of confidence, FFC states the work it has done so far represents a "seed" that its members will continue to sow. FFC's members highlight that, most importantly, they want to see their new learnings and resilience transferred to the women they work with.

Looking ahead, FFC not only requires flexible support and trust from its funders, but a **recognition of the role funders have in connecting FFC with other networks and partners**. For FFC to effectively

achieve its work and programmes, it needs support in carrying out grant missions. For instance, alongside two other organizations it has subsidized, FFC's work on **feminist monitoring** is still in the experimental phase. While the fund's members plan to continue collecting data, putting the tools in place, and relaying them to partners, there are still gaps in their ability to do this work—and donors could support FFC with funds and with their partnership to achieve their goals.

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