Applying design to gender equality programming

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This case study explores the application of design methods and tools in women’s rights programming and feminist grant making - both areas that are, despite growing interest and evidence on potential benefits, still rather underexplored. In 2018, following its first independent evaluation and with the aim to increase its grantees’ qualitative impact, the Fund for Gender Equality, a grant-making mechanism of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women, launched Re-Think. Experiment., an initiative exploring the potential for design to serve as a tool for innovation of programs. Through providing training in key principles of the design process and a safe space for experimentation, nine women-led civil society organizations operating in eleven countries have been equipped with tools and methodologies tailored to their needs to address specific project challenges. This case study introduces context, process and initial results of the initiative and discusses whether hopes for design to serve as a tool to foster innovation were met. Furthermore, it offers a critical reflection on its limitations, the need for contextualizing tools, and growing opportunities by marrying design methods with other social innovation disciplines.

Context and Problem/Opportunity Area

Using design to innovate development

Over the past nine years, the UN Women’s global grantmaking mechanism, the Fund for Gender Equality (FGE) has directly impacted the lives of over 580,000 women and girls from the most marginalized groups across 80 countries and reached millions through policies and public campaigns. Its strategy combines grantmaking to high-quality projects supporting women’s economic and political empowerment and strengthening the capabilities of women’s civil society organizations (WCSOs) through technical assistance and training. As per independent evaluations, its projects have demonstratively advanced gender equality (GE), especially affecting changes around social norms, the creation of women’s collective structures and development of their skills on the local level.

However, following its evaluation and a self-reflection exercise, FGE realized that its projects were not tapping into the full potential of the organizations driving them, that much more could be achieved with the same or even fewer resources posing the following events: Are we grant-makers and project implementers working in the most efficient and effective ways? Are our projects designed to respond to the real needs of the furthest behind? What alternative approaches and tools can lead to more transformative results?

At the same time, there is a large pressure to deliver effective and large-scale impact in the UN’s Sustainable Development era, where 17 Goals have been identified as global targets for progress on key issues including gender, climate, education, health, peace, energy, and more. Traditional project approaches to tackle these issues are often times, good-willed and well-intentioned but many of them are complex and multi-faceted yet
are approached from narrow or misguided perspectives due to lack of capacity, buy-in, and participation from citizens, duplication of efforts, and donor-driven agendas.

Searching for alternative ways to address these issues, leading innovators have increasingly turned to design for help. (Dorst, 2015). As a thought process and way of problem solving, through its tolls and methodologies, design offers unprecedented opportunities to sping new opportunities for innovation and for managing ideas and creativity. (Yee et. Al, 2017). These considerations were the starting point of the Fund’s Re-Think. Experiment., launched in 2018, where over a nine-month span, nine WCSOs, were introduced to and trained in key principles of the design process to address a specific project challenge using a beneficiary-centered design approach.

In applying design to gender programming, the team saw an opportunity “to do development differently” with the objective of creating positive and more lasting impact while at the same time, putting into practice much of what it had been advocating for - placing beneficiaries at the heart of the work, flexible and adaptive processes, addressing root causes using systems thinking, and co-creative approaches that allow for inclusive and participatory development. Furthermore, despite increasing interest in how human-centered design might be utilized in the programming of development projects, its frameworks and concepts are still largely unfamiliar. With the Re-Think. Experiment. initiative, the team, also meant to encourage WCSOs to explore, generate and test design as a tool for their own social innovation in a safe-to-fail environment.

Ultimately, as the Fund supports WCSOs that both reach end beneficiaries – especially the most marginalized communities – and have the capacity to influence at a national level, investing in their innovation capabilities was a powerful catalytic potential to help yield more positive changes towards GE.

![Figure 1: Key takeaways from the “World Café” exercise where FGE grantees examined the concept and practices of social innovation, at the FGE workshop in Istanbul in September 2018. Source: UN Women’s Fund for Gender Equality 2019](image)

**The narrative**

*Complexities of designing in the social fields*

As the Fund identified social innovation as a means to shift understanding and traditional project cycles, it had to change on two different levels—its own way of working as well as at the level of the grantee partners and their projects.
As a first step, the Fund connected with individuals within and external to the UN to gather knowledge and different perspectives on the topic and methodology. This resulted in a collaboration with two independent experts with previous experience in innovation work at the UN (United Nations Development Programme) and the academic world (Parsons School of Design).

The project laid out the purpose, objective, and methodology that initially structured it into six main phases of iterative character: 1) Identify a challenge, 2) Understand and Emphasize, 3) Redefine the challenge, 4) Ideation, 5) Prototyping, and 6) Testing. The process was designed with the intention of creating participants with a safe-to-fail environment that encourages participants to explore, generate and test design as a tool for social innovation through small grants of $15,000, individualized mentoring and coaching, a week-long workshop on social innovation.

The FGE invited 9 grantee partners based and working in 9 different countries to identify a specific challenge that was preventing them from achieving a desired result in their projects spanning from: “how might rural women from disadvantaged communities transition from small-scale producers to profitable entrepreneurs” to “how can we find creative solutions to keep women’s rights in the political agenda in a conflict setting”.

With the aim of unpacking these challenges - the design problem - and considering that it was the first time that most of the grantee partners were applying design methods to their programming, the Fund undertook an expanded phase of coaching on design methods and research at the beginning of the project. Having an extended focus on research at the start also aimed at deepening understanding and building empathy with the multitude of constituencies involved in each context and allowed each organization to reflect how it was best positioned to respond and in what way. The provision of coaching and extended time and space for research and reflection was quite different than the usual practice that FGE provided to partners which placed the most attention on designing a results based framework for the project, the modus operandi for most UN projects.

Through virtual coaching sessions on design methods and research by the social innovation experts and FGE staff, grantee partners were encouraged to reflect their initial assumptions underpinning their current problem statements. This was considered critical as the challenges presented by our partners were of complex - or in Rittel’s words - wicked nature, that require engaging with unusual actors, exploring new points of view, trying innovative solutions. (Rittel, 1972)

In addition, considering that partners were located in nine countries on four different continents, it felt important to appreciate each context’s complexities. All research activities were, therefore, designed as a result of careful inquiry considering the reality of each context, resulting in different research activities for each organization. For example, while in conversation with grantee partners in the Philippines, observation was considered to be an apt method. Others, such as the Paraguayan partners, were encouraged to engage in in-depth interviews, mapping exercises, or - as in most cases - a combination of multiple methods. “The best aspect of this [research] exercise was to be able to have conversations [with beneficiaries] at such a personal and emotional level. It was a very special moment.” - Project Manager, Centro de Documentacion y Estudios, Paraguay.

While recognizing similar areas of experience and expertise, the team recognized the careful consideration of each organization’s context to be critical to the process. By recognizing the unique context and a strong focus on co-creation and capacity building, the team hoped to provide the condition that allowed partners to adapt broad and general design principles to their very specific contexts. Furthermore, “exporting” particular design practices - which might be seen as political as they often come value systems attached - might lead to unintended consequences and hinder pluralism in design practices.

These initial rounds of research resulted in great variety of artefacts such as journey maps, empathy maps, personas, social value canvas, or back-casting which partners were asked to bring to a week-long in-person convening in Istanbul in September 2018. However, the great variety of data that partners collected as part of their research inquiry also drew attention to need of data in the development context.

Large quantitative data sets and long-term studies provide helpful information and assessment on approaches and trends, however, they often lack regional specificities, e.g. disaggregated indicators at local level on women’s political / public role; economic situation, etc. and information about the underlying reality of people’s behaviors and experiences. In addition, typical research tends to narrow its focus towards specific solutions to well-defined problem. Design research, on the contrary, often results in a broader understanding of the problem domain and many alternative potential solutions. By putting an emphasis on integrating design research activities at the early stages of the project, the team ultimately aimed at addressing intrinsic human
needs that may not be easily generalized and develop the empathetic capability need to achieve results of meaningful impact. (Faste, Faste, 2012)

Several rounds of research, ultimately, concluded in the redefinition of the initial problem statements of all partners marking the beginning of our week-long design workshop, intended to create a space for learning and leadership, collaboration, ideation and prototyping of potential solutions.

![Activity at the Istanbul innovation workshop organized by the Fund for Gender Equality in Istanbul with representatives of partner organizations from eight different countries. Source: UN Women’s Fund for Gender Equality 2019](image)

Beyond a one-off training opportunity, the workshop, by building leadership and creative capacities on design as a tool for social innovation, intended to have a long-lasting and sustainable impact on the work of participating partners: drawing from fields such as systems thinking, organizational sciences, design, and behavioral economics, once more, through several sessions we co-created beneficiaries’ archetypes, stakeholder and ecosystem maps, blueprints before moving into ideation.

The broad diversity represented in the room - geographically, culturally, as well as in the form of expertise - was a crucial factor for this workshop - and its extended process leading up to it - to achieve the expected impact: by sharing their experiences and expertise amongst each other, participants allowed for the workshop to become a rich South-South co-creation space. “The positive energy, the friendly environment, and all the collaboration and joint brainstorming are helping me learn a lot and make linkages between ideas,” reflected one participant.

The benefits of this cross-pollination of ideas emerged during ideation as proposed solutions were strongly informed by the approaches and experiences of other teams; and through prototyping, where grantee partners had the opportunity to build, present and receive feedback on their ideas. Once a prototype was selected by each organization, a mini-action plan was drafted for the testing phase. Further monitoring and mentoring sessions ensued.

**One process, nine journeys**

While the structured process was the same for all partners, their journeys through it, were clearly not. It was the first time that most were introduced to design as a programming methodology and this required continuous adaptation due to partners’ contexts and capacities.
By highlighting some critical challenges, key insights and results, the team hopes to contribute to the body of knowledge on the co-creative design process in the development context. As an emerging area of increasing interest and the growing evidence on benefits of applying human-centered design, a high potential for improved outcomes remains untapped and through this process, the Fund and its partners hoped to learn and share its findings and lessons with peer actors.

The case of Athika

Grantee partner in the Philippines - Athika has worked for over 20 years with migrant domestic workers in Singapore and Hong Kong, helping them understand their rights, improve their savings habits, and encourage successful reintegration back to the Philippines when they decide to return.

Athika’s model, consisted in a ladder training program on financial education and entrepreneurship, had reached over 5,400 domestic workers and allowed them to access savings, investment, capital and training – generating nearly $700,000 of investments.

Athika’s identified challenge was getting more migrant domestic workers to enroll in their training programme. Through observation and information interviews Athika found that their beneficiaries, who often work six days a week living with their employers, have little interest, in spending their only day off in training - despite an expressed interest in accessing knowledge in this area. Another finding was that they had a strong longing for community and belonging as well as a belief that a higher religious power would ensure easing of “financial issues”. At the same time, they also learned, that due to their often physically isolated living conditions, Facebook and WhatsApp were their main networks of connection and information.

Athika decided to prototype the “Pinoy WISE iTV”, a 30-minute weekly web-based show centered on savings, entrepreneurship, family issues, legal rights, etc. to their network. The idea came directly from beneficiaries themselves through interviews, intercepts, observational research and informal conversations, and they have tremendous ownership over it.

The case of Centro de Documentación y Estudios

Similarly, FGE partner Centro de Documentación y Estudios (CDE) in Paraguay also works with women domestic workers, who are among the most marginalized in the country, often lack access to basic social services and do not have a minimum wage - the only sector to not have one in Paraguay.

Figure 3: Estrella Mai Anonuevo, Athika Executive Director, during one of the Pinoy WISE iTV programmes informing about investment opportunities for Filipino women migrant domestic workers. Source: Atikha Overseas Workers and Communities Initiative 2019

1748
CDE described their challenge as having limited beneficiary participation in their supported local associations which provide a space for workers to gather, talk about their issues, and organize for advocacy and action.

Through coaching, CDE went back to their constituents and found that they:

- have limited time to dedicate to activism
- are overburdened with work and family duties
- do not know these local associations exist or how to reach them
- have a sense of risk in engaging in advocacy actions
- prefer leisure activities involving their families and community

CDE came with ideas to the workshop in Istanbul but Atikha colleagues suggested what then became their solution: a weekly radio programme made by and for domestic workers to help them access information in a familiar and safe way – and in their own language (Guarani) - and connect with their peers in a playful and accessible form of activism. This initiative also enabled them to have voice and agency over their own rights and advocacy efforts.

The enthusiasm and devotion with which the domestic workers have taken on this project is beyond expectations and tremendously inspiring. By the end of the year, they had already conducted a pilot and developed additional content. They even engaged a popular artist who has created a musical cover theme for the radio show and developed their own branding.

Figure 4: Members of the Domestic Workers Union of Itapúa (SINTRADI) developing the “A Day in the Life of...”. Source: Centro de Documentación y Estudios 2018

Key Learnings

As of today, the evaluation of the Re-Think. Experiment. is still underway with grantee partners wrapping up their testing phase. Final reports will be encompassing a two-part report: a narrative report and exit interview. The narrative report will focus on the results of the activities as well as the overall assessment and reflections on challenges and learnings. The exit interview will place more attention on the process and its effect on the organization and individuals.

Below are a few of the preliminary learnings:

Time investment in project design makes a difference.
For grantees, the time allocation for project design and start-up is extremely important and not enough emphasis was placed on this moment previously. Rather, this stage of grants management was often rushed to get projects quickly starting up rather than taking the time to research, understand, empathize, and pilot activities to help inform the larger full scale project.

From a design perspective this learning seems equally crucial. The fruit of an extensive phase of introduction of participatory design principles and research may not always be immediately evident, but as this project suggests, significantly impacts the short- and long-term outcomes. While the extended focus on research allowed the team to co-create solutions informed by insights gained through research or as one of the grantee partners summarized: “We thought, we knew everything about the issue, but the interviews showed, there are things we had not understood” - Project Manager, Pastoral Women’s Council, Tanzania.

Some preliminary feedback from grantee partners, however, also allowed the team to assume that the investment on strengthening the innovation capabilities may have longer-term effects as they continue to apply their learnings in participatory design methods, systems thinking, and leadership to other programmes and projects.

Enabling environment and good timing are critical.

- The right conditions and right timing allowed for this initiative to be designed and implemented with support from UN Women management and staff. The Fund’s status of limited funding, an uncertain future, a downsized yet motivated team, a trusting donor, ample time allocation, and autonomous space were some of the key factors that allowed this experiment to come to fruition.
- The atmosphere of trust and openness that this project aimed to generate is the result of many factors, including the professionalism and personalities of the external experts. But it was also the result of a process that started years before: FGE had organized two in person grantee gatherings, including one a few months earlier, where informal and formal interactions were fostered in a relaxed and inclusive setup. The Fund started presenting concepts and practices of co-creation, reflection, “thinking outside the box” and horizontal relationships months before the initiative started, which prepared grantees to take on Re-Think.Experiment - by the time it started, they were aware and interested in trying different approaches. The coaching sessions also placed a central focus in being grantee-driven and had a friendly, safe-space feel, which was essential for to engage participants and devote time and efforts in such an unusual experiment.

Design approaches feel right.

- The team was pleasantly surprised about how most organizations almost immediately committed to the ideas that were being proposed. While other elements - such as the gender programming expertise of the social innovation consultants - played a role in this, the reactions observed during coaching conversations and workshops revealed a gratifying sense that proposals were resonating with counterparts and fitted their own previous experiences and thoughts about their projects, while providing new “aha” moments, as expressed by several of them. It felt right. And this made it possible for a set of eight organizations from completely different backgrounds to not only understand but also to immediately jump into using user-centered approaches, to a point that exceeded expectations (e.g. starting to apply them to their regular organization process and to other projects).

Better in person.

- The fact that the team members were based at different locations led to its own challenges: an appropriate time for coaching calls was difficult as time differences spanned over twelve hours. Additionally, internet connectivity, and particularly lack thereof, often led to having to reconnect several times during a call or postponing altogether. In this sense, while the team considered the first phase of coaching and research of strategic importance and overall the calls were the most suitable tool for a global project, pre- and post survey evaluation ahead and after the workshop in Istanbul, give us reason to believe that the end results have benefited from the in-person training. Grantee partners not only had the opportunity to develop their own solutions but also were able to connect, collaborate and find inspiration in the work of others, which in some cases changed the direction of solution.
New partnerships.

Exploring these areas has also provided increased partnership opportunities for the Fund. Prior to this initiative, the FGE did not have technical partners with its traditional grantmaking programme. This experiment allowed the Fund to work with academia (Parsons School of Design), inter-agency mechanisms (UN Behavioral Insights team), sister UN agencies (UNDP Innovation) and strengthen internal UN Women connections. Finally, this experience has been the basis for the Fund to embark on a new design-driven pilot in partnership with two researchers from the Parsons School of Design to test new ways for UN Women to support women’s organizations in a way that better responds to their needs to become more resilient and sustainable. This work is ongoing and will conclude in the Fall of 2019.

Challenges

As with any project, there were certainly challenges — some within the team’s control and others not. For example, three partners based in the Arab States each faced contextual issues: the partner in Yemen was unable to travel to Istanbul nor implement the activities due to restrictions. In Algeria, a government agency restricted the partner to access its funds due to internal approval processes. And in Palestine, as noted previously, the partner was unable to implement its solution because of political sensitivities concerning project activities from national and international stakeholders.

Another challenge derived from the fact that the FGE team tried to assume a double role in this project - one as facilitator and another as participant. The team aimed to learn about social innovation processes in an experiential way; to help solve important challenges; and to help develop more peer-like dynamics with its grantee partners. As such, FGE worked on a challenge of their own to bring to the workshop, hoping to be able to learn from the sessions and apply design methods to find a possible solution to test. Unfortunately, the highly time-consuming nature of personalized facilitation both prior, during and after the workshop made it hard for FGE to find the time to work on its own challenge. A less ambitious challenge, higher team
commitment to this aspect of the experiment and a more structured process for the team could be elements to improve in future similar exercises.

However, the main challenge is sustainability: as the project ends, FGE will not be able to continue its support as grantee partners continue to iterate and implement their solutions; additionally, it will be difficult for the Fund to track and assess the ultimate impact and potential ripple effects of this intervention. While this was foreseen from the inception and grantees were given the flexibility to incorporate their solutions into their ongoing projects, including by deriving some of the available funds to them, the team hoped that by the end of the experiment they would have had the chance to iterate a few times their solutions; yet, time was limited.

Working on future projects of similar kind, therefore, the team hopes to provide its partners with more long-term support throughout implementation and build an initial research and testing phase.

Conclusions

While implementation and analysis of impact are still underway, this project has provided us with initial findings supporting evidence on potential benefits - such as tailored approaches centered around the needs of beneficiaries through initial investment in design research - resulting from applying design to gender equality programming. Furthermore, design in the context of participatory processes functions a social process as designers, donors and participants interact on an eye-to-eye level as well as external stakeholders questioning long-held power dynamics in the field of international development.

Applying a design process, therefore, allowed FGE staff to completely change its approach with its grantee partners and delve deeper into projects with greater effort placed on the learning process and how organizations internalize this; consequently, the FGE’s own knowledge and awareness of different types of understanding, planning, implementation, and evaluation approaches of development programming grew significantly over the course of this project. Using co-creation and blueprint tools, the Fund was able to critically re-examine together with the grantees its own processes and systems, drawing lessons e.g. to simplify their reporting templates, improve communication with grantee partners and streamline financial reporting.

In the light of ever more complex and highly interconnected human development challenges design, therefore, seems to be a promising tool to shift from linear “problem-solution” models toward more comprehensive analyses of realities and iterative processes with room for failure and learning allowing us to accelerate progress towards the 2030 Development Agenda keeping women and girls furthest behind at the center.

References