



© Barbara Horstmann-medica mondiale

The FOWAC team in front of the organisations office.

Safe spaces and an enabling environment for women and girl survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in Northern Uganda

The overall objective of the project was to improve the living conditions of female survivors of sexualized and gender-based violence in Northern Uganda. It was implemented by the Foundation for Affected Women in Conflict (FOWAC) and *medica mondiale*. The key target group consisted of about 1200 young women and girls who were supported through a holistic approach that included psychosocial counselling, socioeconomic activities as well as awareness raising and advocating for the rights of women and girls.

Project duration: 8/2017 – 12/2020

Funded by: German Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) & *medica mondiale*

Project budget: € 600,000

Type of evaluation: Final evaluation

Consultant team: akijul (enabling change) - P. Ashanut Okille & Teddy Atim, Kampala Uganda

Evaluation period: 09/2020 – 12/2020

PROJECT CONTEXT

The project was implemented in the Lamwo and Kitgum districts in Northern Uganda. This region experienced a protracted conflict lasting more than two decades between the government of Uganda and the rebels of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). The LRA waged a brutal war campaign; young boys were abducted and forcibly turned into soldiers, while girls were systematically raped, made sexual slaves, and forced into marriage. The violent conflict forced the majority of the Acholi people to flee to other places within Uganda, where most of them lived in camps for internally displaced people. A large number of child marriages and a high rate of domestic violence and alcoholism occurred there. Though people have been able to return to their homes in the meantime, the region still faces insufficient provisions in the areas of health, education, and infrastructure. In the district of Lamwo, acute malnutrition is twice as high as in the rest of the Acholi sub-region. An above-average level of stigmatization, and many cases of sexualized and gender-based violence (SGBV), are still reported in Omiya Anyima (Kitgum).

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

FOWAC was founded in 2007 as a non-political, charitable organization run by women in Kitgum district, Northern Uganda. FOWAC's priority areas are trauma-sensitive and gender-based approaches in psychosocial, health, and economic work, legal advice for survivors of sexualized and gender-based violence, and educational work at community and district level.

The "Safe spaces and an enabling environment for women and girl survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in Northern Uganda project" addressed SGBV and the empowerment of women through a holistic approach that encompasses livelihood recovery, provides psycho-social support, raises awareness for the rights of women and girls, and supports them in developing plans for their future. Within these activities, FOWAC collaborates closely with the relevant government offices.

The stated goals of the project were:

1. To increase the self-help capacities of female survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.
2. To establish a protective network, including village communities, local community representatives, traditional authorities, state institutions (police, hospitals and courts), authorities for the punishment and prevention of sexual and gender-based violence.
3. To increase the implementation capacities of the local cooperation partners.

The "Safe spaces and an enabling environment for women and girl survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in Northern Uganda project" is a second phase of an earlier project implemented by FOWAC and supported by *medica mondiale* with funding from the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.

OBJECTIVES AND PROCESS OF THE EVALUATION

The aim of the final evaluation was to provide decision-makers at *medica mondiale*, the BMZ, and FOWAC with sufficient information to assess the performance of the project and document lessons learnt. The evaluation was commissioned to aki-jul - enabling change, a Ugandan consulting firm based in Kampala. The final report was submitted in February 2021.

The evaluation focused on identifying areas of impact, assessing the effectiveness of interventions and learning from interventions to identify areas for improvement, as well as areas of good practice.

The evaluators started the evaluation process with a review of project documentation, development of data collection tools, and planning consultations with both *medica mondiale* and FOWAC. Key activities of the data collection in Uganda were:

- » Interviews with 16 key informants, including stakeholders from the local government and administration, teachers, as well as staff and board members of FOWAC



Meeting of a women's peer counseling group.

- » Focus group discussions with 161 women and girls and 10 men who benefited from the FOWAC project.
- » In-depth interviews with two women who were part of the project, focusing on their transformation stories.

The evaluation was conducted in line with OECD/DAC evaluation criteria and is based on document analyses and qualitative data. The data collection was carried out in a participatory way.

LIMITATIONS OF THE EVALUATION

The evaluation process was greatly influenced by the Covid 19 pandemic. The evaluation team could only meet a limited number of respondents. It was possible to mitigate this challenge by coordinating closely with the FOWAC team and mobilizing women's groups that members represented the diversity of the target groups. The evaluation team was also not able to meet with all staff because some had left after the project closed. However, the staff available for meetings were representative of the team and the key departments of the organization – management, pro-

grams, and administration. Furthermore, the upcoming national elections made it hard to speak to some key informants, especially police officers and local politicians and administrative staff.

FINDINGS OF THE EVALUATION

The evaluation responded to the questions formulated in the terms of reference regarding relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, coordination, complementarity and coherence and sustainability, with special consideration of FOWACs holistic approach.

OECD-DAC CRITERIA

Relevance

The evaluation team rated the relevance of the project with very good (1): The FOWAC project was highly relevant. It addressed real needs of the community. The complementary strategies for psychosocial support and livelihood improvement for women addressed crucial issues of the target group, like stigma, economic challenges, tension in relationships, emotional issues/stress,

need for social support, and SGBV. The project was a community-grown and community-based project designed in close consultation with the participating communities. The interventions drew upon existing practices, for instance the use of song and dance to build social networks and as a channel for healing and therapy for those most distressed. Interventions also built on existing community structures, especially women's groups, and established critical relationships with other relevant stakeholders. These included among others stakeholders from the local administration and local government, as well as social workers, who offered counseling to women in newly established counseling centers. These centers also temporarily offered space to the police to attend to cases of SGBV that require immediate attention for psychosocial counseling and medical care. Furthermore, some project groups could be connected to the government community-driven development project that provides loans to community groups who need income for their businesses.

The project also aligned with Government of Uganda policy and development priorities. Women's rights are enshrined in the Ugandan constitution. Enumerated in several articles of the constitution are rights such as women's right to equal treatment with men; equal rights for women upon, during and after marriage; and the prohibition of laws, cultures, customs or traditions which are against the dignity, welfare or interest of women. Since the year 2000 the Government of Uganda has implemented a series of programs to address the challenges Northern Uganda is facing as a post-conflict area. The Peace, Recovery and Development Program for Northern Uganda is meant to eradicate poverty and improve the welfare of the population. One of its objectives is to contribute to rebuilding and empowering communities affected by conflict, and the FOWAC project has contributed greatly towards this effort. Over the past five years, the Government of Uganda has also encouraged and promoted Savings and Credit Cooperative Organizations as a tool to promote self-help economic empowerment in the communities.

Effectiveness

The evaluation team rated the effectiveness of the project as good (2): Overall, the project was able to achieve most of the planned results. However, the implementation was affected by

internal problems, and allegations of financial mismanagement eventually led to the premature termination of the project.

The project was able to strengthen women's economic self-help skills by enabling them to generate their own sources of income. Voluntary savings and loan associations as well as start-up funds enabled women to market agricultural products, purchase cows, goats and chickens, and run small businesses such as motorbike taxis (boda-boda). Later they could use this income to improve their housing situation, send their children to school, and access health services when needed. The empowerment process was described in an interview like that:

"I was abducted and spent three years in captivity where I sustained war injuries. I returned home and got married in 2010, but was unable to get pregnant and have a child which caused problems between me and my husband. We separated and I returned to my maternal home where I joined a FOWAC supported group that enabled me to save some money that I used to buy some goats, and even clothes. With the support, I started looking good and my then husband got interested in me again and followed me at my parents' home to ask me to return to him. I agreed and brought the goats I had bought with me. We cultivated more crops in addition to some money I had borrowed from the group which we used to buy a motorcycle that he now uses for a boda-boda motorcycle taxi."

The psychosocial support provided by the project also strengthened women's emotional self-help skills. FOWAC established counselling centers to provide a safe space where women facing difficulties in their lives and at home could seek counseling. The counseling as well as the participation in self-help groups increased the self-acceptance of war-affected women who had survived domestic violence, and also increased their acceptance by group members and the wider community. One respondent described her change through the counselling as following:

"I would shout a lot which made my children to fear me and they would run off on seeing me. But



The women meet regularly to evaluate their economic success and to encourage each other in difficult times.

all that changed, I don't shout when talking to my children any more like before. The advisory worked with me to change my relationship with my family; husband and children."

Women who had behavioral problems due to their experiences were able to modify their behavior through participation in the groups and became better integrated.

The project contributed to building a protective network with village communities, local community representatives, traditional authorities, state institutions (police, hospitals and courts) and government authorities to punish and prevent sexualized and gender-based violence. Participants in the women's groups were informed about their rights as well as about institutions that can support them in case of sexualized and gender-based violence. These included police, health workers, and local leaders. In addition, the groups offered psychosocial counseling to survivors and their families to help them to deal with their experiences of abuse.

FOWAC's capacities were partly strengthened by the project, but there were also major administrative challenges and financial irregularities that ultimately led to the premature termination of

the project. With a budget of 600,000 euros, the project was able to expand its scope enormously. Furthermore, training offered to staff in areas such as M&E, gender skills, self-awareness and management was appreciated and, according to staff, helped to improve their performance. Specific support was also offered to individual staff, including the executive director of FOWAC receiving training in feminist leadership. Among other things, this inspired her to introduce women's committees/forums in Lamwo and Kitgum districts to promote feminist leadership ideals in her community. FOWAC was continuously supported by *medica mondiale* in the areas of monitoring and finances. Due to the COVID pandemic this was done remotely.

The challenges in the area of institutional development that ultimately led to the premature end of the project included the lack of established administrative structures and procedures to deal with the sudden increase in financial resources and staff members. In addition, there was poor communication as well as conflict between staff and concerns about the quality of management, all of which had a negative impact on teamwork. Attempts were made to solve these problems, but in the end serious financial irregularities led to the termination of the project.



Psycho- social experts do a training to enhance their counselling skills.

Efficiency

The evaluation team rated efficiency as satisfactory (3): The project was generally run efficiently, and resources meant for the target groups actually made their way to the intended beneficiaries. The groups were fully engaged in project activities, including the provision of loans, training, as well as counselling and other support. Staff were also consistent in providing follow-up support for the women and girls that were targeted by the project. Moreover, the project invested in the purchase of equipment needed for the project, including project vehicles, motorcycles, motorcycle protective gear, office furniture and computers. The investment in equipment and buildings was a good investment to further project impact, and also provided equipment and infrastructure that can be used by FOWAC and the communities post-project. Although the project was successful in achieving positive results, the project was ended prematurely because of allegations of fraud as found in the latest audit.

Overarching impact

The evaluators rated the impact of the project as very good (1): The project had a very positive impact on the reality of the lives of the women interviewed. The psychosocial support, which included counseling and medical care,

was a lifesaver for some women who faced extreme challenges in their lives. In particular, the support provided by counselors and within the support groups helped the women interviewed to deal with the challenges in their lives, improve their social relationships, and develop hope about their future. In addition, FOWAC was able to arrange medical support so that women could regain health and well-being. One elderly woman interviewed describes her experience as follows:

“The program stopped me from dying. I tried to commit suicide many times but the counseling stopped me. I now see a difference in me, my children and my husband. Without the counseling, life was hard, I was like someone in a deep pit. I had a lot of worries, all my brothers were killed by the LRA rebels, even my elder son also died and I am now left alone. I was so frustrated because of my husband’s attitude towards me but again, when I look at my maternal family, the place where I could have sought refuge, there was no one because all my brothers died. The counseling and the group saved and helped me to be who I am today.”

The project also contributed to an improvement of the women’s relationships with their families. Through their economic empowerment, they were able to take a new place in the family; their role as co-earners changed gender relations and

created more equality and respect in the partnerships, as one of the interviewed women described as following:

“Our relationship is better as a couple, my husband respects me because I also contribute to the household as a woman. With the training by Ojera John, we are transformed as couples.”

Furthermore, the empowerment of women led to their increased involvement in community leadership and civic engagement. Finally, FOWAC introduced the women’s groups to potential support from local authorities as well NGO programs. The women’s groups were fully registered and successfully supported with the paperwork needed to access outside funds.

Coordination, Coherence and Complementarity

The project was aligned with the priorities of BMZ, medica mondiale and FOWAC, and the evaluation team rates coherence as very good (1): The alignment was further enhanced through a consultative design process that involved the three agencies, to ensure that there was a common understanding of the purpose, implementation modalities and project results. The project was developed through a theory of change process in which the entire FOWAC organization participated. FOWAC also involved other organizations and key stakeholders during implementation, and coordinated their activities with other organizations that had similar objectives.

Sustainability

The evaluation team rated the sustainability of the project as satisfactory (3): FOWAC interventions drew upon existing structures, nurtured critical relationships with duty bearers, and also promoted various self-help competencies of the beneficiaries. All these provide a basis for sustainability, although other forms of support will be required to guarantee this.

Beneficiaries acquired knowledge about human rights and the importance of mental health, as



To reach women in remote villages, FOWAC employees take the motor bike. Especially during rainy seasons its nearly impossible to pass many roads.

© Anna Famula / medica mondiale

well as skills in savings and business management that will continue to empower them. However, the question of continued medical support to the women may not be sustained post-project. Some of those who were treated for complicated gynecological conditions may require follow-up review and medication that they cannot afford without any external assistance. The women’s groups were built on already existing structures and used traditional methods that will continue to be used. The groups were fully registered, with operational bank accounts put in place. This enables them to continue their work, although technical support might be needed from time to time as many members are illiterate and therefore face challenges when it comes to paperwork. The project built on existing community structures and worked together closely with other local stakeholders. These community-based structures will exist after the project period, and part of their mandate includes addressing issues that the project focused on. The engagement, facilitation-coordination and capacity-building of these structures therefore contributed to the potential sustainability of the project results.



© Laura Fix / medica mondiale

A women center in the Sub- County: The women are proud to have their own safe space next to the police station.

FURTHER FINDINGS ON THE HOLISTIC APPROACH

The project used integrated programming to overcome the limitations imposed on livelihood recovery in post-conflict contexts by the psychosocial impact of war and the correlation with individual pessimism about future wellbeing. The focus in implementation, therefore, was to help individual women, and their households, rebuild their livelihoods while enhancing their future orientation. The holistic approach included a focus on network and coordination with local authorities, as well as building up links with existing government programs. It also included building upon already existing women's groups and encouraged a diverse membership – formerly abducted women, women survivors of SGBV, women survivors of domestic violence, young mothers due to early pregnancy, single mothers, widows, HIV/AIDS survivors among others – which helped to address the problem of the stigma associated with over-targeting or labeling a particular group of people or women. In the context of high impoverishment, it was also useful that FOWAC boosted the community savings capability through a start-up revolving fund to each of the women's groups. Last but not least, the use of advisories who are locally based, trusted and known to the local community ensured that group members could easily access them in case of any problems in their households.

CONCLUSION AND KEY LESSONS LEARNED

The project had positive impacts on the lives of the women and girls that were targeted. They shared stories of increased confidence, economic security, better physical and mental health, social cohesion, and acceptance by the community. The women, girls, their families and their communities are thriving because of the project. There is also increased awareness and deliberate effort amongst community leaders and government officials to promote gender equality, and specifically address SGBV. These impacts were attained despite challenges faced by FOWAC related to teamwork and internal accountability.

Key lessons learned are:

1. Integrating trauma counseling and economic empowerment helps women achieve a better life.
2. Economic empowerment helps women open up during counseling support about the situation in their family.
3. The personal economic and physical benefits to the women and their households gives them the motivation to continue with the trauma-healing process.
4. Working in close contact with local authorities and beneficiaries in designing and implementing the program helps achieve the desired

results as it reduces friction and creates goodwill for the project.

5. Institutional capacity-building should place special emphasis on effective financial controls, checks and balances, and also seek to establish and/or strengthen a culture of accountability.
6. Organizational financial growth should also be matched with better working conditions and pay for staff to promote motivation and goodwill.
7. Ongoing and consistent engagement with community leaders and the wider community in project implementation will contribute to greater appreciation and ownership of the project, and possibly reduce the perception that project interventions are owned by FOWAC only.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *medica mondiale* should prioritize a consistent and committed relationship with its partner; it should, through regular and longer field visits to Uganda, deepen its learning and understanding of local context and work hands-on with FOWAC to consolidate achievements and improve program quality.
2. *medica mondiale* should consider working with in-country facilitators or focal points who are

conversant with the local context and can act as a bridge between *medica mondiale* and the partners in the country.

3. In order to address wider negative societal attitudes towards women and girls, future projects should incorporate targeted interventions for men and boys to address their attitude towards GBV and women.
4. The impact of the school-based activities was limited, possibly because the context in schools is different. In order to work with schools more effectively in the future, similar projects should focus on the core i.e. community engagement, and seek partnerships with organizations whose core business is working with schools.
5. *medica mondiale* should ensure a proper exit and closure of the relationship with FOWAC, especially at the beneficiary level. Among other activities, this could include structured events to close the project with the women's group such as refresher training, celebration events, and official handovers of the counselling centers to the sub-county and district authorities.
6. *medica mondiale* could contract a third-party person or organization to manage the exit plans with FOWAC/groups.

Text:

akijul (enabling change) - P Ashanut Okille & Teddy Atim

Edited:

Isabella Bauer, Janna Fischer

Pictures:

Karin Knipp-Rentrop, Barbara Horstmann, Inga Neu, Laura Fix,
Anna Famula *medica mondiale*

Typesetting:

seitz-atlama design

Contact:

Evaluation & Quality Department: evaluation@medicamondiale.org
© *medica mondiale* e. V., Cologne 2022