

# BEYOND CONSULTATIONS

HOW WE DEVELOPED THE TOOL:  
RESEARCH SUMMARY



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## PROJECT OVERVIEW

Women's rights advocates have long called for women's voices from fragile and conflict affected states (FCAS) to be fully, genuinely and meaningfully listened to and heard by those who have an influence over decision-making processes. The *Beyond Consultations* project was envisioned as a constructive response to concerns that current consultation practices are often extractive, tokenistic and disempowering. *Beyond Consultations* is also intended to support the realisation of women's fundamental right to meaningfully participate in the decisions that affect their lives. Central to the approach to *Beyond Consultations* was ensuring that women's groups in FCAS were genuinely and meaningfully able to influence the project itself.

The *Beyond Consultations* tool is the culmination of a participatory research study with 225 individuals and organisations from 15 countries looking at the factors that enable and constrain the meaningful participation and ongoing engagement with women and women's organisations in FCAS.[1]

The good practice framework set out in the *Beyond Consultations* tool was informed by the voices and insights of women in FCAS. These were gathered through an extensive, participatory research study which comprised of an online survey, key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) with women, women's organisations, international NGOs, academics, governments and multilateral organisations.

The *Beyond Consultations* tool was developed based on the key findings that emerged from this research project. It aims to enable actors to:

- Benchmark the extent to which they are engaging meaningfully with women and women's organisations in FCAS
- Identify targeted areas of challenge and opportunity
- Identify enabling and constraining factors in approaches to consultations
- Assess ways in which national and international decision-makers are consulting with women and women's organisations, and advocate for better, more equal and more meaningful standards.

The tool is designed to be used as part of a learning process – it is as much a guide as it is a self-assessment tool. The score obtained through this tool should be used as part of an ongoing cycle of assessment to enable organisations to highlight good practice, chart areas for improvement and map progress over time. It should be used as early as possible during the planning and design phase of engagement, and regularly revisited throughout the participation activity and its evaluation.

**Ultimately, the *Beyond Consultations* Tool aims to ensure that women and women's organisations' voices are heard, listened to and acted upon; that their contributions shape the future of their communities, countries and international decisions that affect their lives; and that their rights and needs are met.**

1. The term 'women's organisations' used throughout the *Beyond Consultations* project refers to a diverse range of formal and informal organisations, movements, groups and networks working on women's rights, gender equality and peacebuilding.

## UNDERPINNING PRINCIPLES

This project was a partnership between the UK Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS) network, Women for Women International, Amnesty International UK, Saferworld and Womankind Worldwide. The approach for conducting the supporting research for *Beyond Consultations* tool was developed with the intention of modelling good practice, to ensure women and women's organisations were engaged in a participatory and collaborative effort to understand what meaningful consultation, engagement and participation looks like. From the outset, we agreed some key underpinning principles that would guide the project.

The research study prioritised a rights-based and 'do no harm' approach and conducted the study in a gender-sensitive, empowering way. Throughout the whole project, project partners protected the confidentiality of participants and gained informed consent from all participants.

In addition, we:

- Openly and clearly shared the purpose of the research and what would be done with the results with research participants
- Kept research participants informed about key project activities
- Offered research participants the opportunity to be part of the verification process.

The project engaged women from a range of different geographical locations which were at different stages of the conflict cycle, with particular inclusion of marginalised and socially excluded women. The intention of this was to directly respond to the concerns that the majority of consultations are reliant on consulting with the same groups, where only the voices of capital-based, well educated women are heard. The research process therefore aimed to hear from women with varied experiences and levels of participation in consultation and engagement processes.

The research project was informed by the voices and experiences of women in FCAS and its findings were fed into the development of the *Beyond Consultations* tool. The research has successfully facilitated the participation of a range of women and women's organisations, from those who have given expert advice to high-level UN panels, to women who are never consulted.

*“Every opportunity should be taken to make women feel valued for their contribution, and to enable future participation. This works when consultations are run in respectful, empowering ways.”*

Focus group discussion participant, Afghanistan

## METHODOLOGY & PROCESS

Extensive research was carried with the purpose of examining the effectiveness of current participation processes, what works and how they could be improved to ensure that they are meaningful and impactful.

Through stakeholder interviews, KIIs and FGDs, this study documented the experiences and expertise of individual women and women's organisations in FCAS as well as organisations who are often *doing* the consulting (such a donor governments, INGOs and international institutions).

The following stages of a multi-country participatory research project were carried out for a 6 month period in 2018 with 225 individuals and organisations from 15 countries participating.

### RESEARCH DESIGN

- **Online survey:** we developed an online survey to gather quantitative feedback from organisations with experience of participating in consultation processes. This was shared widely and was completed by organisations from Uganda, Nepal, South Sudan, Zimbabwe, the UK, the US, Canada, Yemen, Egypt, Germany and Ethiopia.
- **Key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) with women and women's organisations:** we conducted KIIs and FDGs with women, women's rights organisations, INGOs, academics, governments and multilaterals in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Nepal, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, Uganda, Yemen and Zimbabwe. Additional FGDs were conducted in with marginalised women including women living with disabilities and women with low or no literacy from Afghanistan, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen.

The project was designed to reach a diverse set of participants and include women of various religions; races; ethnicities; geographical locations; literacy levels; ages; and educational status. Some participants took part in individual interviews and others in FGDs which were designed to accommodate particular access requirements such as varying disability needs, literacy levels and rural locations.

### VERIFICATION PROCESS

Project partners designed a verification phase for the tool which included clearly feeding back the global findings to participants. This phase of the project ensured the development of the tool modelled good practice and enabled a robust verification. This allowed the research participants to have an opportunity to review and comment on the tool that had been developed based on their input.

We sent a summary of the research results to all research participants along with the draft *Beyond Consultations* tool for their comment. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive and suggested that the tool had accurately incorporated the findings from the research phase.

## KEY FINDINGS

The key findings from the research highlighted:

- Most consultation processes are extractive. Many women are concerned that, even when consultation and engagement does occur, their input is not heard or acted on and their voices do not matter. Women and women's organisations often do not receive any feedback or follow up.
- When women are consulted, they are often restricted to talking about what are categorised as "women's issues" such as gender-based violence (GBV) and not broader political and socio-economic issues.
- Women and women's organisations are not currently engaged meaningfully as equal partners in the planning, design and implementation of decision-making processes. They are often engaged as an after- thought, with no time or space to ask questions or provide feedback.
- Women are not involved in setting the agenda, scope and content of consultation processes they are being consulted on, and participants are not fully briefed on the purpose and agenda of consultation exercises.
- A diverse range of women's voices are not being heard and the most marginalised, particularly rural women and grassroots organisations are under-represented in consultations.
- The factors that most hinder women's participation are related to inadequate time and support for women to fully prepare for consultations.

*"To be honest, very little thinking goes into risk. Everything has been systematic to respond to donors and tick boxes, but the actual risks are the things no one has the time to think about."*

Key informant interview with stakeholder

## KEY FINDINGS CONTINUED

- When women and women's organisations are consulted, it is often not in any depth and women remain missing from many peacebuilding and statebuilding conversations.
- Lack of logistical support, including ability to travel, finance, childcare and support for accompanying persons were highlighted as some of the most significant barriers to women's participation in available consultation processes.
- Limited funding and attention has been given to developing long-term, meaningful dialogues to enable women to, where necessary, strengthen their skills and establish on-going relations within decision-making arenas.
- Some women and women's organisations lack the technical skills and experience, for example in disarmament processes or peace processes, to participate as effectively as they would like. For processes to be meaningful women should be supported through training and capacity strengthening.
- A mixed-method and context-specific approach to consultation is best, for example including workshops, KIIs and FGDs. In this way, consultations can better meet the varying needs of stakeholders and women's organisations to ensure diversity of experiences and skills.

*“Women’s opinions in the rural areas should be asked and included as well.”*

Key informant interview with research participant in a FCAS

## HOW WE APPLIED THE FINDINGS

This research resulted in the development of the *Beyond Consultations* self-assessment tool. This tool was designed to support national, international and multilateral organisations to self-assess the extent to which their current consultation practices, large or small, meaningfully engage women and women's organisations in FCAS. Women and women's organisations in FCAS can also use the tool as a resource to assess those consulting with them and advocate for better standards.

The *Beyond Consultations* tool can be downloaded in Arabic, English, French and Spanish at [www.beyondconsultations.org](http://www.beyondconsultations.org)

*“All the issues raised [in the tool] are very much important to us and we welcome them.”*

Woman participation in focus group discussion feedback during the tool verification process

[www.beyondconsultations.org](http://www.beyondconsultations.org)



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