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Multi-donor trust funds at the United Nations: Transforming development aid or business as usual?

Abstract:

Multi-donor trust funds (MDTFs) have become one of the most prominent aid modalities in the past decade (Barakat, 2009). The United Nations alone has raised USD 5.5 billion through MDTFs and, in the process, has placed civil society organizations at the center of efforts to secure human rights around the globe. Through a case study of UN Women's Fund for Gender Equality and a categorical analysis of MDTFs, this study shows that, even at their best, MDTFs are bound by institutional constraints and funding environments. Amidst mounting claims that human rights and development goals are unattainable without active civil society participation, MDTFs offer a unique vehicle for governments and development agencies to directly strengthen, fund, and engage with civil society organizations. However, MDTFs can offer only limited new horizons of possibility to reach civil society actors and transform development financing.

Keywords: aid effectiveness, civil society, grantmaking, multi-donor trust funds, women's rights, United Nations

Introduction

In 2008, the Government of Spain made one of the world's largest investments in women's rights: USD 65 million to the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)ⁱ to establish the Fund for Gender Equality. The Governments of Norway and Mexico joined the following year with another USD 3.5 million. The new multi-donor fund aimed to provide grants globally to governments and civil society organizations to fast-track women's economic and political empowerment. Spain's initial donation constituted more than 30% of UNIFEM's annual income in 2008 and set in place an unprecedented resource for gender equality actors.

The Fund for Gender Equality marks a major new trend in international development: the multi-donor trust fund (MDTF). Through MDTFs, Global North countries pool resources to deliver large-scale funding to governments and civil society actors around specific issues, from post-conflict reconstruction to HIV/AIDS to climate change. With development agencies such as the United Nations and the World Bank collecting and managing funds, dispersing grants and monitoring impact, MDTFs offer countries low anticipated costs for financing development projects. Development agencies have touted MDTFs as a comprehensive tool to directly target particular thematic issues and fund diverse change agents, from governments to non-profits and research institutes (e.g., Guder, 2010). MDTFs differ from recent aid delivery methods such as social funds, which are much smaller, and joint programs, which support UN- or World-Bank-led program implementation rather than provide grants (Barakat, 2009). The ability to substantially support a range of actors has become increasingly important as development agencies and social movements alike have acknowledged that the exclusion of civil society organizations has limited the impact of development interventions (Steinle & Correll, 2008). Tomlinson (2006) argues that

development goals such as poverty reduction and gender equality will only be achieved if development agencies change current practices to actively involve civil society organizations (CSOs). Though civil society can take on many different meanings, within development funding, CSOs generally consist of non-governmental organizations that represent particular issues or groups on local and international levels (Steinle & Correll, 2008). Several MDTFs, including the Fund for Gender Equality and the UN Democracy Fund, have placed civil society organizations at the center of efforts to secure human rights around the globe.

As multi-donor trust funds pass well into the billions of dollars in aid monies, they are transforming both modes of accessing development financing and the practices of the institutions that house them. However, Barakat (2009) argued that “the theoretical benefits of MDTFs have been lost during implementation as donors bent the model to their standard operating procedures” (p. 110). With so much promise and even more money, can these funds redress the lack of participation by civil society organizations and usher in new models of development financing? Or will they rely on development practices that undermine their ability to bring to life better modes of aid delivery?

In the first section of this paper, I ask if thematic multi-donor trust funds make possible different relationships in development financing, particularly to reach diverse actors in civil society to advance human rights. I argue that a categorical analysis of MDTFs is vital to understanding the potential for this transformation and call for a distinction between MDTFs that directly fund civil society and those that do not. In the second section, I ask if, when and how the United Nations’ MDTFs can open new spaces of support for a diverse range of actors in securing human rights. Using the Fund for Gender Equality as a case study, I find that even with the best intentions, MDTFs can offer only limited horizons of possibility for supporting women’s rights.

Practice seeks theory

I joined UNIFEM (now part of UN Women) in July 2009 to help establish the grantmaking systems for the Fund for Gender Equality and stayed for two years, through the first full grant cycle. Working within a multi-donor trust fund, I witnessed first-hand the organizational barriers to implementing the institutional structures necessary for large-scale grantmaking within an agency much more experienced in program implementation. At the same time, I participated in the creation of a development aid model that I hoped would directly benefit women’s rights organizations in their local contexts. I looked for academic research to guide the Fund’s efforts and interventions, but found remarkably little. This vantage shapes my perspective on the Fund’s aspirations to be widely accessible, a project in which I am personally invested and which motivates this study. However, it also provides me in-depth exposure to complexity of the topic at hand and enables me to identify questions that will be pertinent in both theory and practice.

To address my subject and my positionality, I draw on my interdisciplinary training in public policy, feminist studies, and sociology. I derive my analysis from a sample of 1,239 anonymized applications to the Fund for Gender Equality, public documents from 45

MDTFs at the United Nations, and policy documents from UN Women, and reports on the questions of aid financing. I sincerely welcome debate, discussion, and especially increased scholarship from other disciplines and vantage points to understand if, how, and under what conditions development monies can work for women's rights.

Policy papers and sectoral strategies: Calling for a theory of MDTFs

Despite the explosion of multi-donor trust funds in the past decade and more than 50 years of scholarship on the impact of development aid, critical analysis of the forms, functions, and implications of MDTFs has almost exclusively remained in the policy realm. With few exceptions, such as Barakat (2009) and Feeny and McGillivray (2009), academic scholarship has not addressed the proliferation of multi-donor trust funds, even as a wealth of empirical studies across disciplines investigate the purposes, efficacy, and other modes of development financing (see McGillivray, Feeny, Hermes, & Lensink, 2006). For example, studies of microcredit and microfinance have been subject to peer review, public critique, and ongoing scholarly debate and have informed both development theory and policy (Elahi & Danopoulos, 2004). The absence of commensurate academic research on MDTFs could reflect the modality's newness, with a less enduring track record, or a perception that MDTFs do not significantly differ from other financing tools.

Development agencies reflect a different view. Over the past decade, the United Nations, World Bank, and the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID), and others have commissioned studies and reports on MDTFs as tool for development interventions. These studies include discussion papers, evaluations of specific funds, and conference presentations to development practitioners and rarely examine the historical, political, or economic context in which MDTFs have become a significant funding mechanism. Moreover, the work developed by and for development agencies almost exclusively focuses on how MDTFs meet donors' interests, needs, and priorities and does not address the experience of or impact on fund recipients. Heimans (2002) and Tembo, Wells, Sharm, and Medizaba (2007), commissioned by the UN and DFID respectively, do explore such funds' potential challenges, particularly around local ownership, coordination, and financial sustainability. However, these two papers are largely descriptive, policy-focused, and provide actionable suggestions rather than critical assessment of the funds they study. Neither deeply explores the conditions that are propelling MDTFs or the conditions that they reinforce and create.

Barakat's article, "The failed promise of multi-donor trust funds: aid financing as an impediment to effective state-building in post-conflict contexts" (2009) in *Policy Studies* singularly develops a strong analysis of MDTFs as a distinct aid category. Using the case study of the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, Barakat places the emergence of MDTFs into historical context and examines the relationship between donors' desires and fund recipients' needs, finding them often at odds. His methodology and attempt to understand the experience of donors *and* recipients stand apart from development agency reports. However, his methods and findings have not been addressed, questioned, or tested by subsequent papers. So far, the study of multi-donor trust funds remains under the

purview of practitioners, not academics, despite MDTFs' increasing prevalence and influence.

Scholarship and policy papers alike embody another limitation in the literature, a focus on trust funds by theme and sector rather than an analysis of the role of trust funds in development. In particular, current work on MDTFs reflects three major thematic trends: post-conflict reconstruction (Baudienville et al., 2010; Bakarar, 2009; Leader & Colenso, 2005; SCANTEAM, 2007); environment/natural disaster/climate change (Mitchell, Anderson, & Huq 2008); and, to a lesser degree, HIV/AIDS (Cheru, 2002). While illuminating and at times analytical regarding broader impacts of MDTFs, these studies largely leave the multi-donor trust fund uninterrogated as a new and distinct form of aid financing.

Critiques of aid effectiveness have gotten closer to exploring the implications of different aid financing mechanisms. Most prominently, the Association of Women's Rights in Development (AWID) has issued a series of ten "primers" on aid effectiveness and women's rights, as well as a number of special reports. In its 2009-2010 brief, "Trends in Bilateral and Multilateral Funding," AWID does not distinguish between bilateral and multilateral modalities, collapsing the two into "special funds or budget lines dedicated to advancing women's rights and gender equality" (Alpizar, et al., 2010, p. 24). This flattening does not fully address the complexities of multilateral aid negotiations, in which governments vie to define issues and funding priorities. Whereas countries themselves administer bilateral funds, multilateral funds must adhere to the accountability structures and decision-making of the UN or World Bank, require donor agreement and have to fit within agencies' priorities and competencies. Perhaps a strategic move to show a growing base of resources for women's rights, AWID's work nonetheless does not account for the specific practices that occur when an array of donors dedicates funds through a MDTF.

The limits of current scholarship call for a deeper analysis of MDTFs as a category of aid, emerging within a particular historical and political moment in which governments are pooling billions of dollars into MDTFs, often with the goal of development that engages civil society. MDTFs reflect and create new relationships of power, money, and ideology within development practices. As a start, I first seek to understand the driving forces, conditions, and mechanisms that define MDTFs in the field of contemporary aid financing.

Emergence of the multi-donor trust fund

At their most basic, MDTFs are a mechanism to manage large-scale donations for thematic- or country-specific grantmaking (UNDP, 2011) and follow general governance arrangements:

- A fund administrator (secretariat), such as a United Nations agency or the World Bank, that manages all administration and coordination of the Fund;
- A policy body (steering committee) that sets the framework for the fund and, under some arrangements, ratifies grant applications. These bodies typically include donor

representatives, multilateral representatives, national government authorities, and thematic experts;

- A funding decision-making body (technical review board) that reviews grant applications (see UNDP, 2011).

With their streamlined funding and decision-making structures, MDTFs have quickly become one of the most prominent aid modalities, promising high-impact, low-transaction-cost financing for development (Barakat, 2009). Donor countries, particularly those in the Global North, are establishing MDTFs to meet their development aid pledges, including Official Development Assistance (ODA), a funding commitment monitored by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and set at an aspirational and rarely-met .7% of gross national income (OECD, 2002). MDTFs offer a site to coordinate ODA according to aid effectiveness commitments and promote issue areas that fit donor countries' priorities – all without the burden of direct administration.

The two primary fund administrators are the UN and World Bank. The two agencies have developed some complimentary funding efforts, but primarily manage separate trust funds. The World Bank's funds tend to emphasize institutional growth and economic growth efforts, whereas the UN brokers more civil society-government partnerships (Ball, 2007; Guder, 2010). In simultaneously responding to donor-driven mandates and courting new and larger donations, these two institutions reify their roles in the current era of development finance, attempting to position themselves as the preferred method for large-scale resource delivery.

While other recent innovations, such as social funds (much smaller than MDTFs) and joint programs (implementation-focused rather than grantmaking) have affected development financing, no other funding mechanism has had the proportional impact on development resources. At the United Nations alone, more than USD 5.5 billion has been donated to MDTFs, with an average income of USD 125 million. As a point of comparison, the Secretary General's two-year budget plan for 2010-2011 projects USD 5 billion in expenses for the *entire* UN system (General Assembly A/64/7, 2009). UN Women, home to the Fund for Gender Equality, reports a net income of USD 163.5 million in 2010. While the total MDTF income spans multiple years, as Table 2 below illustrates, they have largely come into existence in the past five years.

Whereas many UN agencies work through partnerships with governments and NGOs, the grant modality of MDTFs allows funding to countries without a UN presence and often through substantially larger monies than many UN-led programs.ⁱⁱ In addition, thematic restrictions and flexibility to choose grant recipients provide a level of direct donor selection that current aid effectiveness measures limit by design. As cemented in the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness & the New Aid Modalities (PD) and the 2008 Accra Agenda for Action (AAA), the aid effectiveness agenda calls for greater coordination and harmonization of development financing and places stipulations on donor countries to deliver aid through national government systems in recipient countries. While some current MDTFs directly fund aid effectiveness efforts, such as the United Nations'

Delivering as One, others are using this mechanism to fund specific issue areas, including through grants to civil society in grant recipient countries.

Table 1 provides a window into the thematic areas and dollar amounts of MDTFs at the UN.

Table 1. United Nations Multi-Donor Trust Funds: Themes and Income (in millions)

<i>Thematic Area</i>	<i>Total Income</i>	<i>Number of Funds</i>
Conflict/Post-Conflict	2,840	14
Humanitarian Aid	893	1
Millennium Development Goals	706	1
UN “Delivering as One” (program for aid effectiveness and alignment of development financing)	515	17
Women’s Rights (gender equality, violence against women, sexual violence in conflict)	158	3
Disaster Relief	128	2
Civil Society in Democratic Transition	126	1
Environment	119	2
Health	42	1
Country Funds	2	2
Indigenous People	0 ⁱⁱⁱ	1
TOTAL	5,530	45

(UNDP, 2011; UN Women, 2011).

MDTFs mean big money for the issues that have garnered donor interest. While I do not delve into the implications of this donor-driven financing trends here (see Heimanns, 2002), this table shows that a limited number of MDTFs expressly target human rights issues, such as women’s rights and the Millennium Development Goals. In addition, many of the UN’s MDTFs include funding windows or priority areas for human rights, such as the MDG Achievement Fund’s gender equality and women’s empowerment window. As MDTFs collect and disburse resources to advance human rights, they might offer a unique vehicle to coordinate development aid *and* respond to critiques that rights-focused aid can only succeed with active civil society participation (Steinle & Correll, 2008; Tomlinson, 2006).

Table 2 illustrates the range of MDTF approaches to funding civil society. Based on my analysis of the UN’s MDTFs, I divide funds into three categories:

1. Funding to UN programs, including those in partnership with implementing government, NGO, or development agency partners
2. Direct grants to civil society organizations and/or governments
3. Mixed funding to UN and non-UN programs.

Table 2. Top 15 UN MDTFs by Year Established, Grant Recipients, Income (in millions)

<i>Fund Name</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Grant Recipients</i>	<i>Income</i>
UNDG Iraq Trust Fund	2004	UN & development agencies	1,358
Sudan Common Humanitarian Fund	2005	UN & humanitarian agencies	893
MDG Achievement Fund	2006	UN agencies	706
DRC Pooled Fund	2006	UN agencies & NGO implementing partners	640
Peacebuilding Fund	2006	UN agencies & NGO implementing partners	400
UN Democracy Fund (UNDEF)	2005	CSOs, especially in transitioning states	126
UNDG Haiti Reconstruction Fund	2010	UN, CSOs, governments	126
UN-REDD Programme Fund (environment)	2008	Governments	118
South Sudan Recovery Fund - SSRF	2008	UN, the International Organization for Migration, CSOs	113
Somalia Common Humanitarian Fund	2010	UN agencies, CSOs	113
Tanzania One UN Fund	2007	UN agencies	106
UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women	1996	CSOs, governments, UN country teams	78
Fund for Gender Equality	2009	Women's CSOs, governments	70
Mozambique One UN Fund	2008	UN & implementing partners	66
Pakistan One Fund	2007	UN agencies	66

(UNDP, 2011; UN Women, 2011).

The three categories of grant recipients demarcate three types of response to aid effectiveness mandates and their critiques. In category one, MDTFs harmonize and align development programs and coordinate donors to this end. The clearest examples are the UN “Delivering as One” funds, which make up 38% of UN funds (17 of 45) and constitute 9% of the total income. On the other hand, MDTFs like the Fund for Gender Equality and the UN Democracy Fund fall firmly in category two, explicitly seeking to increase resources for civil society groups in their issue areas. The UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women and other mixed funders sit between these two poles, but their direct grants to CSOs and governments do not rely solely on the existence of UN programs. Though funding to UN agencies and UN programs does not necessarily mean civil society is left out of the equation, it does not fundamentally adjust aid financing as it existed without MDTFs. For example, many UN programs operate in concert with implementing partners, including civil society organizations and governments. MDTFs such as the Delivering as One pilot have served to increase available resources, but still maintain traditional flows of money for UN agencies and their implementing partners. In contrast, categories two and three have the potential to reach new actors in countries without current agency offices and substantially increase resources for civil society groups. Such grants might also allow for greater agility when administered directly to CSOs rather than through the often-lengthy process of moving funds from UN agencies’ secretariats to country or regional offices and

then to implementing partners. Studying MDTF grants across these categories offers a test of if and how large-scale targeted funds for civil society have the potential to bring about new relationships of aid delivery and affect the issues these funds seek to address.

The scale of these funds and the divergence from program-implementation models to grantmaking require shifts in infrastructure, practices, and norms within development institutions. These changes have the potential to alter how development agencies and grant applicants alike mobilize resources and the relationships that govern fund management. This creates new opportunities for internal reform under the mandate of changing aid modalities. However, where such reform is not possible due to institutional inflexibility or outdated practices, it potentially undermines the effectiveness with which MDTFs can be implemented (Barakat, 2009). Barakat's account also illustrates how the success of MDTFs for a specific organization hinges on practical details of their application, rather than sharing an overarching goal.

Development aid investments are highly political, predicated on complex relationships between nations and development agencies. The specific sites, mechanisms, and processes of these investments set the conditions of their reach and impact. Centered between the recent ascendancy of aid effectiveness and critiques that civil society has been excluded from development practices, MDTFs' ability to reach new actors remains tenuous and evolving. To understand *if* and *how* MDTFs might forge unprecedented relationships in development financing, I turn now to the Fund for Gender Equality.

UN Women's Fund for Gender Equality

In December 2008, UNIFEM and the Government of Spain announced a joint venture: the Fund for Gender Equality. Launched with an inaugural investment of 50 million EURO (USD 65 million) from Spain, the Fund served as a multi-donor grantmaking mechanism designed to fast-track action on women's economic and political empowerment by providing grants to civil society organizations, government agencies, and partnerships between these two sectors in the Global South.

Typical of MDTFs, the Fund consisted of a Secretariat, managed by UNIFEM (now UN Women). The Secretariat reported to a Steering Committee composed of donor countries, UN and other multilateral agencies, and representatives from women's movements, and coordinated a Technical Committee for review of grant proposals. The Fund was the first UN Women-managed global grantmaking program,^{iv} the world's largest fund dedicated to women's economic and political empowerment, and one of only two grant pools for women's rights with grant amounts in the millions of dollars (Alpizar, Clark, Pittman, & Rosenhek, 2010).

Amidst a burgeoning field of bilateral and multilateral funding mechanisms, the Fund for Gender Equality claimed a unique niche in its emphasis on country-level programs focused on national plans, policies, and laws for gender equality, as well as its funding for partnerships between civil society and governments (UNIFEM, 2008). This approach specifically responded to the aid effectiveness agenda and the shortfalls of the Paris

Declaration and Accra Agenda for Action. As women's rights groups, civil society organizations and multilateral representatives themselves have argued, the aid effectiveness agenda has diminished targeted funding for gender equality and women's rights and has reduced tracking of resources toward these goals (Craviotto & Schoenstein, 2011). The Fund for Gender Equality grants aimed to fill this gap by providing substantial grants directly to civil society and governments to meet commitments to achieving gender parity and implementing the Convention to End All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (UN Women, 2011). Within its report briefs on aid effectiveness, AWID has called the Fund for Gender Equality an "example of a means through which governments could channel predictable and long-term funding directly to women's rights organizations" (Schoenstein et al., 2011, p. 22) and hailed it as a singular example of multilateral financing for women's rights NGOs (Alpizar et al., 2010).

The Fund for Gender Equality offers a best-case scenario, where the political will and framing appear to support a women's-rights-based approach to aid financing. The Fund provides a case study to examine the degree to which MDTFs might indeed reach civil society for human rights gains.

Findings

Throughout this paper, I have asked if MDTFs can reach a range of civil society actors. Though a qualitative analysis of the Fund's 1,239 grant applications, I map the overall grant pool and track the frequency and rates of types of declines by region and language. I find two competing results in the Fund's support of civil society. First, the Fund's deliberate interventions and innovative policies successfully generate applications for a diverse range of gender equality actors around the globe. However, the United Nations' institutional requirements for providing grants, regional variation in women's movements, and the gap between large grant sizes and NGO financial capacity limit the degree to which accessible grant programs can support new actors.

Transforming Access

Through its eligibility requirements, the Fund set new standards for support to civil society within UNIFEM. It eliminated funding to UN agencies and other multilateral organizations and strongly discouraged applications from big international NGOs (BINGOs). In its second call for proposals, in progress at the time of this writing, the Fund further limited eligibility to women's organizations only and prohibited global and international NGO applicants altogether. It crafted a model of co-lead application, new to UNIFEM, in which two organizations and/or agencies could apply for a joint funding and encouraged government applicants to partner with NGOs. In addition to its priorities, the Fund sought to increase accessibility by producing all application materials in five languages (Arabic, English, French, Russian, and Spanish). In contrast, applicants to the Millennium Development Goal 3 (MDG3) Fund must submit proposals in Dutch or English (MDG3, 2009). The Fund's multi-lingual approach responded to the critique from grant-seekers from around the globe who cite language barriers and an emphasis on professionalized English as a significant barrier to accessing international resources (Duschinsky, 2009). Finally, the Fund's

competitive grant review process reinforced a women’s rights framework and emphasized direct impact in the lives of women. A technical committee of 39 government officials, women’s rights leaders, development professionals, and academics reviewed and scored eligible and approximately 500 promising proposals (Miller & Silliman, 2010). Through a competitive and dynamic process, the Fund hoped to extend beyond formal United Nations circles to directly support women’s movements, CSOs, and governments.

As a result of these steps and as one of the few grant programs of this size for gender equality, the Fund garnered 1,239 proposals from 127 countries and amounting to USD 2.3 billion in requests (Miller & Silliman, 2010). This outpouring of applications dwarfed the 300 to 500 applications it had anticipated based on the experience of other funds. As expected, the preponderance of applications came from civil society organizations: 80% from NGOs; 11% from NGO-government partnerships; and 9% from governments. Across the board, 70% of the applications met the Fund’s basic eligibility requirements and 30% were ineligible (Miller & Silliman, 2010).

Beyond the large and diverse applicant pool, the Fund also successfully reached out to non-English-speaking applicants from around the globe, as illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3. Fund for Gender Equality Applications by Language

	Arabic	English	French	Russian	Spanish	# (%) of Applications
Africa	9	306	93		4	412 (33)
Arab States	24	62	5			91 (7)
Asia and the Pacific		341	1		1	343 (28)
Central and Eastern Europe and the CIS		83		29	1	113 (9)
Latin America and the Caribbean		51	4		225	280 (23)
Total	33	843	103	29	231	1,239 (100)

While 68% of the total applications came to the Fund in English, the regional breakdown shows that having all five languages increased accessibility significantly. (The English percentage is skewed by Asia and the Pacific, which submitted 99% of its applications in English.) This is particularly true in Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Arab States, where Russian and Arabic constitute over a quarter of the proposals, respectively. Without translation services for these often-omitted languages, a full quarter of applicants in the regions would not have had the chance to present their proposals.

Constrained Possibilities

The low-scoring applications and applications that do not meet the Fund’s basic and publicly-stated criteria reveal fissures in this portrayal of a highly accessible grant program. Most importantly, they link the Fund for Gender Equality and its applicants

inextricably to particular political, economic, and regional contexts that ultimately limit which actors can access the resources promised for women's rights.

The applicant pool reveals regional differences in grant-seeking skills and enabling environments for gender equality. The small representation of applications from the Arab States (7% of all applications) and Central and Eastern Europe and the CIS (9%) show that the Fund for Gender Equality's specific conception of gender equality is uneven across regions. Moghadam (2009) argues that legal and cultural practices in the Middle East and North Africa limit the efficacy of advocacy and legislative reform for women's rights. Even where women's movements are active, governments might prove either intransigent or oppositional. In Central and Eastern Europe and the CIS, women's formal organizing and international fund-seeking burgeoned in the late 1980s, much more recently than in the three larger regions. Whereas actors in other regions turn out in full force to make an effort to fit their programs into the Fund's framework, organizations in these regions make far fewer attempts, perhaps reflecting less experience accessing this type of funding for gender equality or from large multilateral donors.

The *types* of declines in the regions show further inconsistencies in the enabling environment necessary to receive a Fund grant. In the Fund's "implementation" grant category (more than half of the Fund's applicants), Africa represents the highest regional decline rate, with 41% of applications from the region not meeting the Fund's basic requirements. Twenty percent of applicants from this region do not focus on an eligible law or policy (a Fund requirement for the implementation grant category) and 25% lack legal registration as NGOs (a UN requirement to disperse funds). These two types of declines are higher in Africa than in any other region. In a region with countries emerging from conflict and in which customary laws might hold more weight than formal legal structures, the Fund's requirements demand a particular type of formalization in gender equality that does not match the context. In contrast, Latin America and the Caribbean has among the lowest automatic decline rates, with only 18% of no-policy declines (as compared to 25-26% in all other regions except the Arab States) and 5% of no legal registration. These data are consistent with Alvarez's (1999) depiction of the Latin American women's movement's "NGOization," or the institutionalization of women's non-governmental organizations that she argues has propelled a Latin American NGO boom, emphasized policy advocacy and privileged alliances with governments and civil society over more radical feminist goals.

The regional variation in the applicants' ability to present their approaches to gender equality invites further investigation – particularly of diversity within each region – and challenges of global grantmaking models. It suggests the need for greater context-specific considerations. For funders, this may mean maintaining open or broad criteria, continuing to attend to issues of accessibility (such as language and technology), and supporting capacity development in areas with less fund-seeking experience. For women's movements, this could reinforce what they already know that policy-focused gender equality interventions require an enabling environment, including government support and a high level of institutional development, and might not always prove the most relevant issue area or strategy for women's rights in a given context.

In addition to its emphasis on a particular kind of formalization, the Fund for Gender Equality reflects a paradox in jump-starting women's rights resource delivery: the capacity of organizations to meet UN standards to manage large grants. The Fund's Steering Committee foresaw that "[i]t is crucial that the Fund for Gender Equality is accessible to women's rights organizations, which may not have absorptive capacity to manage large grants. It should also consider funding consortia of NGOs" (FGE, 2009, p. 2). Absorptive capacity refers to the financial systems, staff, and practices to manage the yearly grant allocation. The lack of resources for women's rights has substantially limited the number of organizations with track records of managing budgets in the millions of dollars, with nearly three-quarters of women's rights NGOs operating on budgets of less than USD 50,000 (AWID, 2008). The Fund's co-lead application attempted to address this concern by distributing a single grant to two organizations to absorb and manage the funds jointly. Also, though it had publicized grants of up to USD 5 million, the Fund reduced its grant awards after an internal analysis of grantees' financial capacity. This mismatch between absorptive capacity and grant size has plagued MDTFs, which are in the business of infusing large grant amounts quickly (Barakat, 2009). In response, the Fund has reduced its grants to USD 1 million in its second call for proposals.

Finally, the Fund's aspiration of competitive global grantmaking in which knowledgeable and neutral experts assessed grant applications using empirical and common criteria requires scrutiny. As Espelund and Sauder (2007) have argued, ranking and scoring processes are never isolated or neutral. They convey the values of the Fund and of UNIFEM, all within the context of development, multilateral funding priorities, and promoting gender equality. The transparency and access of the Fund's grantmaking – vital to the quality of the applications – must nonetheless be placed within context of both the public priorities and internal mandate that guides the Fund's review of its applicants. Though my data does not enable such an analysis, as a cornerstone of the Fund's efforts to reach and fund high-impact programs in women's economic and political rights, the grant process itself, from the criteria to the institutional practices, must be analyzed in context.

Conclusion

Multi-donor trust funds vary in form and function and are a recent phenomenon in development financing. The variation in the types of grants – from those that firmly advance the Paris Declaration to those that seek to redress its shortcomings – and the range in grant recipients indicate that this new modality is not set in stone.

The Fund for Gender Equality proves that MDTFs have the potential to reach new actors, particularly those in civil society, at the same time realizing this potential requires deliberate attention. Even at their best, MDTFs cannot escape the institutional frameworks in which they operate. Supporting civil society also demands nuanced understanding of national and regional contexts. For example, legislative environments and the practice of legally registering CSOs vary and, if held up as requirements for grant eligibility, might limit where funds are directed. As a promising resource across many global issues, such considerations affect where, how, and to whom these monies travel.

Civil society actors, donor countries, and development agencies are helping define the practices and potential of this new aid-financing tool. Though talking about a different kind of development, that of theory, Stuart Hall provides some insight into the dynamic process occurring in MDTFs:

...ideological categories are generated and transformed according to their own laws of development and evolution... It is also... the necessary 'openness' of historical development to practice and struggle. We have to acknowledge indeterminacy of the political – the level which condenses all the other levels of practice and secures their functioning in a particular system of power (1986, p. 44-45).

During the current period of openness, MDTFs still serve as a platform for a wide range of approaches to and manifestations of development goals. In the articulation of their aims, alliances, and strategies, MDTFs hold the potential to foment new kinds of development efforts that meaningfully support civil society, in all their diversity. This potential, combined with the size, scope, and increasing prominence of MDTFs, demands comprehensive analysis; my study has been an attempt to spark such investigations.

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ⁱ In 2010, UNIFEM became a part of the new United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, known as UN Women. The Fund for Gender Equality is now a UN Women program.

ⁱⁱ This is not consistent with the World Bank, which issues national and bilateral aid packages significantly larger than a typical MDTF grant (Guder, 2010).

ⁱⁱⁱ This fund was established in 2010 and has not yet become operational.

^{iv} Since 1996, UNIFEM (now UN Women) has helped manage the Trust Fund to end Violence Against Women, an inter-agency grantmaking mechanism. In contrast, the Fund for Gender Equality is a UN Women Fund responds to an external Steering Committee and does not fund UN agencies.