

Malawi Violence Against Women and Girls Prevention and Response Programme

Survivor Support Fund: Further lessons learnt and
recommendations

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Introduction

The Malawi Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Prevention and Response Programme, also known as Tithetse Nkhanza (TN), was designed as a £17 million six-year programme to reduce the prevalence of VAWG and improve the justice system for women and girls experiencing violence. Funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), TN was delivered through a consortium of Tetra Tech International Development, Social Development Direct (SDDirect) and Plan International.

Who is this paper for?

This paper is for practitioners working on topics related to response services for survivors of violence against women and girls. The focus is on Malawi, though many dynamics and implications are relevant to a global audience.

TN delivered interventions which aimed to both prevent and respond to VAWG. Initially working in three districts of Malawi, the programme aimed to pilot innovative approaches, designed with reference to the global evidence base on best practice. One such approach was the Survivor Support Fund (SSF), a community-level mechanism that aimed to increase access to response services for VAWG survivors by addressing physical and cost barriers to justice, health and psychosocial facilities.

The SSF provided small funds directly to survivors, enabling them to access the support that they need and desire. This primarily included support to access justice and health services, but also to access additional relevant response services, such as temporary accommodation and psychosocial support. The fund was administered through partnerships with Women's Rights Organisations (WROs), which have a membership network across the communities in which TN was implementing its prevention and response work. Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) were developed in consultation with the WROs, which guided the delivery of the service. Accompaniers were also identified from within these communities and were trained on survivor-centred approaches and the VAWG Referral Pathways Guidelines such that they could ably escort survivors on their journey through response services to seek the outcome the survivor desired.

From the commencement of the SSF in early 2020, the fund supported 593 VAWG survivors to access response services. According to anonymised monitoring data that WROs submitted to TN through its digital data collection platform, COSMOS, approximately 30% of survivors receiving support from the SSF were referred to the Police, approximately 21% were referred directly to court, 18% were referred to Community Victim Support Units, 6% to hospitals or health clinics, 2% to Village Tribunals, and 10% to other avenues. These included community elders, Legal Aid, Administrator General, Social Welfare and, in some cases, matters were settled by the WRO. In 13% of cases, the institution to which the survivor was referred was not recorded.

Approximately 75% of survivors who sought support from the SSF were provided with funds for transportation to reach service points, at an average of MWK 11,700 per survivor (approx. £10.30). This suggests that service points are a significant distance from survivors, as it demonstrates the high demand to support travel costs for service access. Approximately 44% of survivors received money to buy food or were provided food by the WRO, at an average cost of MWK 6,600 (£5.80) per survivor. According to case data reported, very few survivors were provided accommodation. Anecdotal reports suggest, however, that WRO members frequently provide shelter for survivors within their own homes, and so this low-level reporting may suggest that WRO members do not record the provision of support in this manner. This issue is associated with the point below on informal social safety nets and does present risks that require further consideration to mitigate. When reports of accommodation support were provided, the survivor was provided with an average of MWK 17,500 (£15.50) to pay for accommodation. Costs were not reported for those who received psychosocial support, which may be because WROs considered themselves to have provided psychosocial support in their interactions with the survivor, which they would not have charged for. Only two survivors were reportedly provided with money to pay for medical fees, at costs of MWK 7,000 (£6.20), and MWK 10,000 (£8.80). This suggests that the other survivors who were referred to hospitals or health clinics either paid for their care directly or were provided services free of cost. Finally, no costs were recorded for legal fees, suggesting that survivors who were referred directly to courts either paid directly for their court fees or the costs for these fees were not accurately recorded.

Regrettably the SSF – and the full TN programme – was closed earlier than anticipated in mid-2021 due to significant cuts in the UKAid budget. Whilst the fund was initially designed to be delivered over a period of six years, the early closure resulted in a delivery period of approximately 1.5 years.

This briefing note shares lessons garnered from TN's implementation of the Survivor Support Fund in Malawi. It seeks to provide actors operating in VAWG prevention and response with recommendations to consider in the design of such an intervention, should others be interested in implementing a similar approach in Malawi or elsewhere.

Lessons and recommendations

Sustainability

Sustainability is the major conundrum of all development initiatives, but the stakes are higher with this kind of initiative. This was highlighted by TN's experience of abrupt and unplanned closure of the SSF. With the fund's closure, support was potentially removed whilst survivors' cases were still active, leaving them unable to pursue justice, and potentially at increased risk having decided to initiate a case. TN is also aware that its work with WROs has increased demand for their support, whilst closure has left the organisations with expectations that cannot be met.

Recommendation 1: Turn your objective on its head – invest in WROs | Though the concept of a Survivor Support Fund may be considered innovative from the perspective of a donor-funded development programme, it is not a new initiative for WROs. Informal social safety nets are very well-established in many low-income countries, and as such WRO members have been, and will continue to, offer support to survivors of VAWG in their communities, regardless of whether it is funded. Informal safety nets are not a substitute for formalised, funded interventions, as they rely on financially burdening individuals with already low-incomes and high demands. They also do not offer the assurance of survivor-centred, legally appropriate support. Moreover, with respect to sheltering VAWG survivors, housing survivors within the homes of WRO members, for example, places both the survivor and the member at risk of retaliation with no protection from the perpetrator. What TN provided through the establishment of the SSF was; a) funding to increase the scale of support available and reduce the burden on WRO members from using their own personal funds for this purpose, and b) knowledge and skills in survivor-centred support, referral pathways, and case management to ensure survivors were provided with accessible, empowering, sensitive support that prioritised their human rights and contributed toward perpetrator accountability, if that was the outcome she desired.

TN approached this intervention with the end goal of delivering the Survivor Support Fund. WROs were therefore brought on as partners due to the value they could add to the programme's aim, given their experience and presence in TN's target communities. A more sustainable and empowering approach, however, would have been to support the WROs in achieving their own agendas, recognising the alignment with those of the programme. This would have led TN to take an organisational development approach to working with the WROs, which, based on the WROs' self-assessment, would potentially focus on the quality of support they were providing, including survivor centredness, referrals, case management and more. However, it would have also supported the organisations to diversify their sources of funding, and strengthened their capacity to manage other donor funds, thereby supporting their longer-term sustainability. This approach has also recently been promoted by UN Women,¹ and is achieving positive results, such as those demonstrated by the Africa Women Development Fund, Mamacash, FRIDA fund and Raising Voices. To mitigate concerns that professionalising this work may lead to 'formally educated/qualified' individuals (and likely men) entering into the space, actors could prioritise *experience* as a WRO as qualifying criteria over formal qualifications, and develop further checks and balances to mitigate fiduciary risks should the donor require them.

Recommendation 2: Staggered closure | If an SSF intervention is to have an end date, ensure that a wind-down phase is planned for, whereby no new cases are supported during the period, to avoid the risk of the fund closing part-way through a survivor's case proceedings. During this period, WROs should also be accompanied to communities to explain that they will not have the same level of funding available in future, whilst supporting the organisations to plan and deliver resource mobilisation strategies.

¹ UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women, Strategic Plan 2021 - 2025

Eligibility criteria

When asked for feedback on the administration of the SSF, the point most commonly raised by partner WROs was that there were too many forms to complete in the SOPs, often leading members to probe a survivor for longer than they were comfortable doing. One of the forms assessed survivor eligibility for support in accordance with the stipulated criteria FCDO provided; namely that the survivor must not have the disposable income to cover the costs required to access support services, and that she should have experienced VAWG in the past 12 months.

The reality is that women coming to WROs for help are in need, whether that be financial or the need for accompaniment. The amount of time spent assessing financial need not only risks further traumatising the survivor, but also requires significant administrative time for little gain, and is therefore considered inefficient.

Recommendation 3: Remove eligibility criteria | TN recommends that an SSF intervention in future should include no eligibility criteria, in order to mitigate risks of further traumatising survivors who have sought help, and to reach higher levels efficiency, thereby increase value for money offered by the investment.

Case management plan templates

TN provided guidance to WROs on case management planning in the SOPs but did not provide a template for mapping or documenting a case management plan. Case-level data reported to TN suggested that in approximately 60% of cases, improvements could have been made either to the way in which the case was recorded or managed in terms of support provided and referrals made. Further, deep dives in some cases – such as the example provided in Box 1 – also demonstrate that WRO members themselves have been socialised with harmful norms that influence their own beliefs and behaviours. As non-legal experts, they may require technical expertise and oversight in their management of cases to ensure they comply with laws, protocols and the principles outlined in the Essential Services Package for Women and Girls Subject to Violence,² to which TN adhered.

Box 1: Example case review

One WRO partner handled a case of a woman with mobility challenges who was raped by a businessman within her community. This resulted in her becoming pregnant. The WRO, using SSF funds, supported the woman and her grandmother (her guardian) with transport, food and court costs.

The magistrate ruled in favour of the woman and the perpetrator was sentenced to nine years imprisonment with a condition that the survivor be assisted with amenities for her survival. However, when the TN Technical Legal Advisor requested to review the judgement, it was noted that the WRO had pleaded with the magistrate not to send the perpetrator to prison, arguing that the woman needed his support. The magistrate referenced this plea in his sentencing and reprimanded the WRO.

Recommendation 4: Case management template | Providing a case management plan template would prompt WRO members and accompaniers to refer to case management and referral guidelines as they support survivors to plan the actions they wish to take, and services they wish to seek. This would also provide a Quality Assurance mechanism for the fund manager, enabling technical expertise to be provided on the basis of plans submitted, if required.

Adequate and appropriate fund management personnel

In the initial planning of the TN organogram, the oversight required for the SSF was underestimated. Responsibility for the fund's delivery was assigned to the VAWG Prevention Lead, who was also responsible for overseeing the delivery of multiple large-scale prevention interventions at community level. As such, the SSF was not afforded the time required for quality management, or to respond to the recommendations provided here.

Recommendation 5: Ensure adequate and appropriate personnel for fund management | Any actor seeking to deliver an SSF intervention should ensure that there is a fulltime, dedicated, appropriate team member whose sole objective is the effective delivery of the fund. This individual ought to be a feminist, who has experience of applying feminist approaches to working with partner organisations. They would further require a sound understanding in the challenges faced by WROs in their work, and of the challenges faced by survivors of VAWG, as well as knowledge of the VAWG response service referral pathways relevant to the country in which they are operating.

² <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/12/essential-services-package-for-women-and-girls-subject-to-violence>

Costs to be covered

The objective of SSF was to increase survivors' access to support and justice. In order to do that, at times WROs needed to provide financial support for costs relating to witnesses attending court cases, family members travelling to provide childcare and other costs not directly borne by the survivor or her accompanier. WROs fed back to TN that they provided this support by charging these costs to the accompanier budget line and, in some cases, it was reported that they tried to influence court proceedings such that the survivor and witness travelled together, thereby justifying the witnesses' costs as those of an accompanier. WROs should not be limited in the nature of the costs to be covered in supporting a survivor to pursue a case as she so desires, but should feel able to assess the appropriateness of costs required in this regard.

Recommendation 6: Go beyond survivors' costs | An SSF intervention should recognise that money is needed across the survivor's network in order to facilitate her pursuit of support and justice. Fund management should be flexible to pay for costs as needed, rather than be restricted to only funding the survivor and a recognised accompanier.

Working with service providers

One of the key challenges faced by WROs in the delivery of the SSF was the request for funds from formal frontline service providers themselves. For example, it was reported that Police Officers would frequently ask for transport fares to assist their travel to apprehend a suspect, or to travel to court, whilst Social Welfare Officers reportedly requested transport fares and Daily Subsistence Allowances (DSAs) to travel with survivors. In discussions between TN and WROs, there were many reflections that providing this support could have long-term negative consequences by incentivising service providers to prioritise cases for which they received funds to operate, and may demotivate them from continuing should funds no longer be available. Furthermore, it may lead them to reduce any pressure that they may be putting on their central headquarters or district councils for resources to carry out their work. Conversely, if these funds were not provided, frontline service providers often stated that they had no means, such as vehicles or money for public transport, to carry out their functions and so would not do so.

Recommendation 7 | Before an SSF intervention is started, the fund manager should hold strategic conversations with heads of service providing institutions (police, social welfare, health, judiciary and others) outlining the fund, explaining that it is likely to lead to higher demand for support from their frontline service providers, and have frank conversations as to whether the frontline is adequately resourced to meet that higher demand. Agreement should be sought on what should be feasible for frontline service providers to do with the resources provided by government, and whether this higher demand would require additional resources to be provided through a funding mechanism associated with the SSF. Technical Advisors working on public finance management (PFM), governance and social development should be involved in these conversations to ensure that the position arrived at meets agreement across these issues. Agreement should be sought on a feedback loop such that in incidences where frontline service providers profess to not have access to needed resources, this can be raised with higher levels and addressed.

Support for men

TN SSF adopted a Leave No-one Behind (LNOB) approach and so did not disqualify adult men from receiving support should they be vulnerable and had experienced 'genuine' violence. From the case-level data reported to TN, 1.8% of cases involved an adult male complainant. However, in two of these cases, the complaint was that their spouse was subjecting them to sexual violence by withholding sex from them (which TN would treat as abuse of the female partner for obligating her to have sex if/when she does not consent to do so), one was a complaint that there was no peace in the house and the wife was not cooking for the man, one was a case whereby the wife had been caught having sex with the man's brother (this was referred to the police), one related to a woman wanting to divorce the husband, and one was related to a woman building a house without her husband's knowledge. If the SSF had continued, TN would have investigated these cases further to better understand the nuances and advise on support to be provided to the woman where needed. This suggests that WRO members also need to be supported through a gender transformative process so that they can recognise when cases reported by men are actually cases where the woman is likely to be experiencing violence. That said, TN still reserves its position that in some cases, men (and possibly men within the LGBTQI+ community) may be vulnerable to violence and should be afforded support if required.

Recommendation 8: Gender transformative journey for WROs | WRO members may also require support to go through their own gender transformative journeys to challenge the harmful norms in which they have been socialised. This could be provided in conjunction with organisational development support as noted in recommendation 1.

Recommendation 9: Provide guidelines on what constitutes violence against men | TN recommends that support be made available to men who are vulnerable and have experienced violence. Clear guidance on what constitutes violence against men should be developed in consultation with WROs, which should also provide suggested strategies on responding to instances where a man requests support for an issue that the SSF would actually classify as VAWG.

Temporary shelters for survivors

A key learning from the SSF administration was the issue of safe temporary shelters for survivors in contexts where there are no physical shelters available. This is one of the costs that falls under the SSF. Previously, WRO members would offer their homes to survivors, which was discouraged by the police given the inherent risks of retaliation from perpetrators against whom they have no protection. To reduce risk, WROs would report to the local chief if they were providing shelter to a survivor. With the establishment of the SSF, WROs conducted assessments of various accommodation options in their districts, selecting lodges and other places that were safe and affordable, and established relationships with the owners to be able to provide temporary shelter to survivors anonymously.

Recommendation 10: Support WROs to establish safe shelter options within their locale. Any actor interesting in establishing an SSF should work with WROs to address the issue of shelter for survivors during the inception period. Risk mitigation and Safeguarding against SEAH strategies should be developed before the SSF begins.

Use of Technology

Experience showed that it was crucial to have open communication lines with WROs in the administration of the SSF. Through WhatsApp, trusting relationships were established and technical support was provided in a timely manner as needed. WhatsApp groups set up by TN brought together different WROs and were an effective, active platform for sharing updates, learning and resources. Additionally, these groups were used to check in with each other and provide peer support. By building solidarity among WROs and sustaining wellbeing through self and collective care, TN supported grassroots activists to begin to dismantle the patriarchal norms that underpin violence against women and took initial steps to ensuring that volunteers working on VAWG do not burn out from this work.

Moreover, the provision of mobile phones to administer the SSF proved to be a worthwhile investment, as it helped WROs to communicate and be better coordinated. Through the use of mobile money, SSF resources were easier to access and allowed for a more timely response and support for survivors than when members had to meet to hand over money. WRO members in different locations were able to report a case and request financial support, which was immediately sent through mobile money. The cost of administering mobile money was insignificant, and the paper trail that is automatically created provides checks and balances meaning that, overall, this approach offered better value for money than using a completely cash-based system. The members maintained a case register and liquidation forms where they logged the resources used.

Recommendation 11: Use locally appropriate technology to support WROs as required. TN strongly recommends that a review of locally available technology, such as mobile money and WhatsApp groups, be conducted during the inception phase, and the administration of the fund to be design on the basis of the findings.

Disability inclusion

Part way through implementation, WROs were trained in disability inclusion so that they may be better placed to serve the needs of women and girls with disabilities. WROs also began to take pro-active steps in reaching out to women with disabilities who may have experienced violence. For instance, one WRO reached out to a woman with physical disability whose house was burned down due to a family dispute. TN also facilitated coordination between WROs and local Organisations of People with Disabilities (OPDs) to further enable their outreach to PWDs.

Recommendation 12: Design purposeful outreach mechanisms to reach PWDs and members of marginalised groups. TN introduced disability inclusion processes following the commencement of the fund, and immediately saw an increase in reach to PWDs. TN recommends that a social inclusion strategy be developed for the SSF during the inception phase, with the provision of adequate technical support to WROs to implement the strategy objectives. Monitoring mechanisms should also be established such that further action can be taken to increase reach if required.