

WOMEN'S CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS OF THE FUTURE

A Design-Led Exploration
With Women's CSOs of Possible
Responses to Current and
Future Challenges



The Initiative

Shrinking democratic spaces, increasing repressive and conservative forces, limited funding, and rising global inequalities are just some of the current challenges that women's civil society organizations (CSOs) face. In the coming years, they will continue to confront these issues at even more unprecedented levels. Their ability to adapt, do different things and do things differently might be the key for impact and resiliency.

Civil society, and specifically women-led organizations, play a pivotal role in advancing gender equality and realizing the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They hold governments accountable for translating their commitments into laws and policies and into implementation and enforcement. They respond to the needs of the most marginalized communities that are sidelined from public policies and services - women and girls being too often among them.

Yet, CSOs are confronted with these challenges in rapidly changing environments with new and interconnected challenges, players, and power dynamics.

To operate in this context and continue providing social value to their communities, women's CSOs might be required to make profound shifts in their responses, capabilities, and operations. Questioning programming and management style, re-thinking funding, mobilization and partnership models - all this requires adaptiveness, innovation, and transformation.

In 2019, UN Women's Fund for Gender Equality (FGE) in partnership with the Parsons School of Design and with financial support from the Government of Denmark, launched a year long research-action initiative to explore how the FGE and UN Women at large could better support women's CSOs to stay relevant, and to be resilient and sustainable agents of change in ever-changing environments.

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Continuous exploration paired with collective reflection must be integrated in feminist action processes. Opening new spaces, new methodologies, new ways to do and be - all are essential in the creation of alternatives for a more inclusive society.

**Cooperativa Sulá Batsú,
Costa Rica**

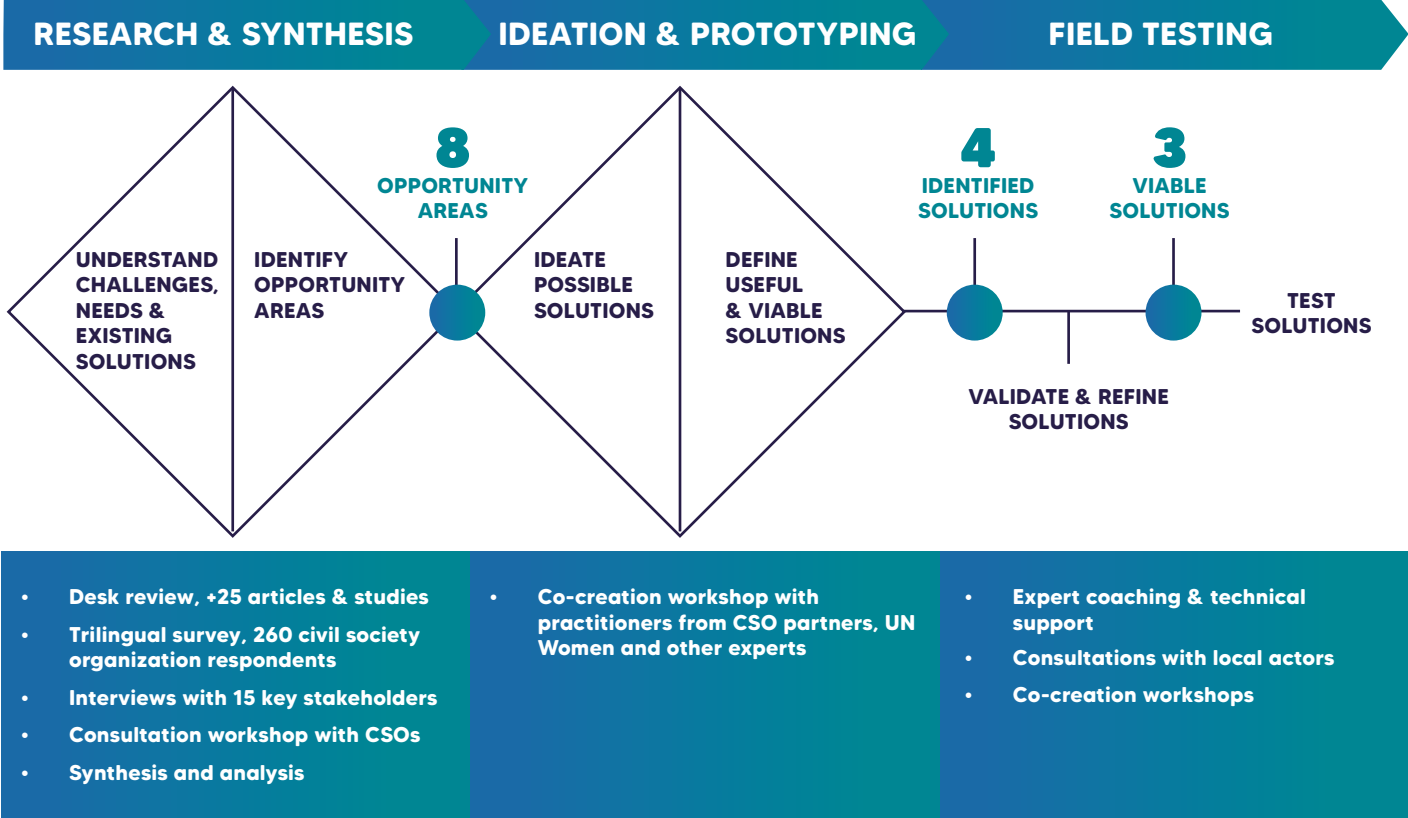
About the Fund for Gender Equality

UN Women's Fund for Gender Equality supports national, women-led civil society organizations (WCSOs) in advancing women's economic and political empowerment. It transforms funding from donors into high-impact initiatives led by women, investing in their ideas and capabilities, and benefitting millions. An

ever-evolving instrument at the service of women's CSOs, the FGE has increasingly deployed social innovation with an emphasis on creative thinking, collaborative partnerships, and smart risk-taking, and with the ultimate objective of maximizing a positive impact in the lives of the most marginalized groups of women and girls.

The Process

This project applied a design-led and human-centred process tapping into our imagination to envision alternative futures shifting away from antiquated structures. Thus, it enabled alternative approaches and engaged inclusion and pluralism as drivers for the innovation needed to meet current and future challenges.



Research & Synthesis

The central challenge that this project attempted to address was: **How might the Fund for Gender Equality and UN Women at large better support women’s organizations to stay relevant, and be agile, resilient and sustainable agents of change in ever-changing, complex contexts?**

As a starting point, the FGE sought to identify the main needs, priorities and challenges of women’s CSOs. It explored existing good practices around alternative funding and partnership models; alternative organizational processes, structures, cultures and values; and alternative programmatic approaches. A preliminary analysis from the research identified:

- CSO challenges, such as competition for funds, dependency on donor funding, donor-driven agenda, project-to-project funding and work overload;
- CSO needs, including to expand their networks and access spaces for reflection, experimentation and growth;
- Working solutions from the CSO space, such as the diversification of funding sources (e.g. consultancy-based model, selling materials or renting spaces); and

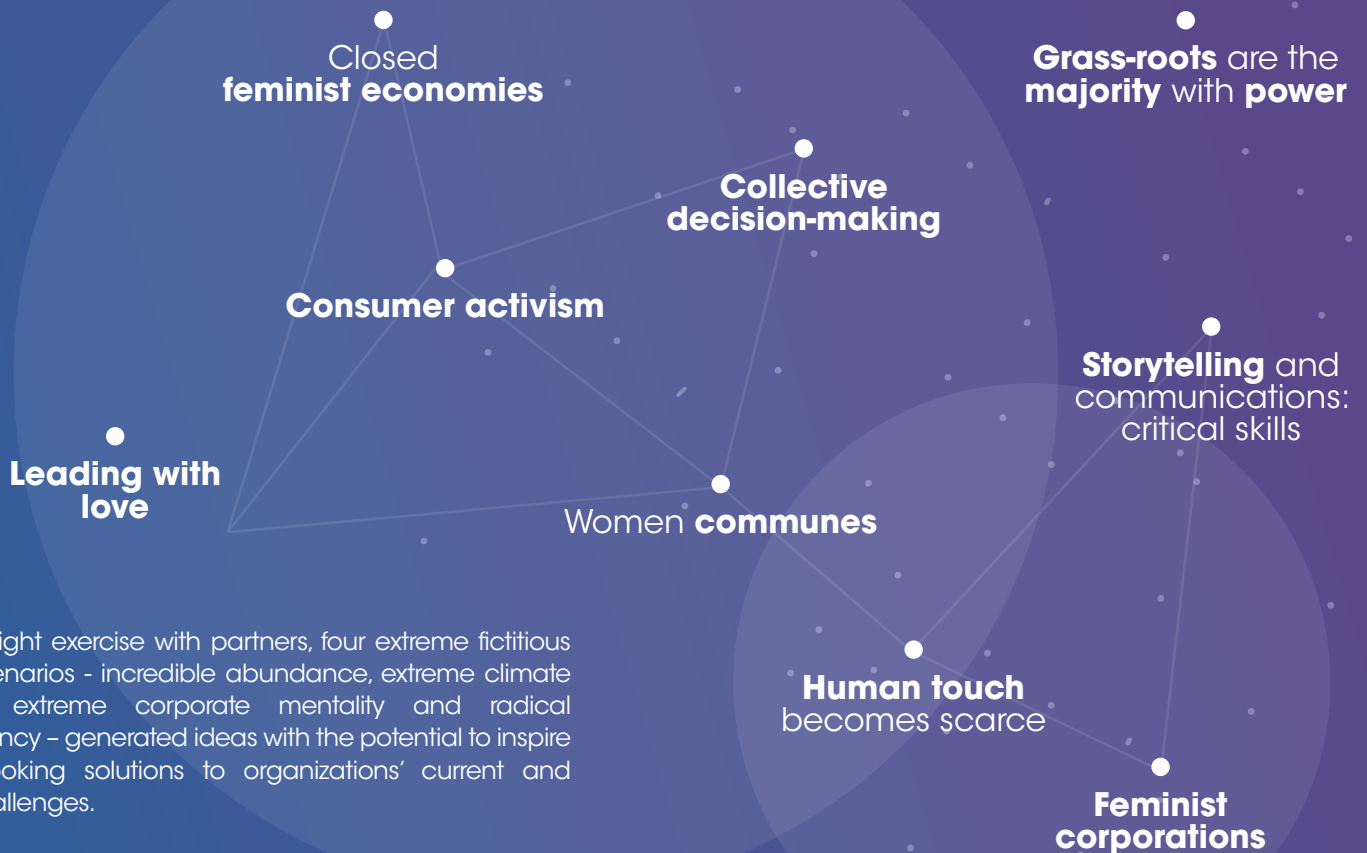
- Working solutions from the donor space, such as more accessible funding application and reporting processes, and diversification of grants including for organizations effectiveness or smaller organizations.

A workshop with over 30 participants from around the world from civil society, the private sector, and social enterprises provided additional insights and greater depth to the research findings, while providing inspiring ideas on possible partnerships and solutions, after using foresight methodologies.

A total of eight areas of opportunity were identified:

1. How might we support partnership development across different women's civil society organizations in lieu of competition?
2. How can we support the integration of self-care into organizational practices?
3. How can we redefine grantee-donor relationships and power dynamics towards an equal partnership with mutual benefit ("reversing the top-down")?
4. How can selection, reporting and accountability mechanisms be simplified and turned into a more tangible value add for grantees?
5. How can we enable the creation of spaces for experimentation?
6. How might we make continuous learning an integral component for everyone involved in a programmatic cycle?
7. How can we better facilitate women CSOs' exploration of alternative funding opportunities?
8. How can funding models allow for more contextual research prior to programme proposals and execution?

Exploring Futures



In a foresight exercise with partners, four extreme fictitious future scenarios - incredible abundance, extreme climate change, extreme corporate mentality and radical transparency - generated ideas with the potential to inspire forward-looking solutions to organizations' current and future challenges.

From money exchange
to knowledge **/feelings**
exchange

Circular **economies**
of **knowledge**

New **models**
of **trust**

Collaboration is
part of the **solution**

Love and
compassion flourish

Citizens
are funders

Shared power
among men &
women

Programmes' priority
is **innovation**

Citizens are
shareholders of
CSOs

Self-care is a
default option

Flat hierarchy
- world as a
collective effort

Group funding
- crowdsourcing

Project focus on
self-defense &
wellbeing

Ideation & Prototyping

During a two-day ideation workshop, practitioners and experts identified strategic entry points to address some of those areas. They chose the four most promising ideas, further refined them and after several iterations developed initial concepts and low-fidelity prototypes.

Solutions included: the establishment of a virtual mentorship and solidarity network for women's organizations and social entrepreneurs to share expertise (Area #1); a grant-making model co-created and co-managed by donors and recipients (Area #3); a tool to foster creativity in meetings (Area #5); and an NGO starting to offer consultancy services as a means to explore alternative sources of income (Area #7).

Refining & Testing

After the workshop, leaders for each solution consulted with colleagues and partners, expanded their research and replicated co-creation sessions to reassess their prototypes' feasibility, viability, and desirability, with technical and coaching support from design experts.

As a result, the four solutions underwent various iteration processes before moving to field testing. The impossibility to conduct a realistic testing for the new global grant-making model led to dropping that solution.



We played, we constructed, and we solved a problem. I loved the whole process. We creatively came up with a full idea that is ready to be implemented.

**SMART GIRLS Foundation,
Uganda**

TOOLS & METHODS

Below is a selection of tools used to create a participatory design process that would help women's civil society organizations and UN Women develop better solutions and accelerate change.

EMPATHY MAP. A collaborative design tool used to gain deeper insight into different stakeholder groups.

IDEA CANVAS. A strategic template for developing and documenting ideas and working models.

FIELD TESTING CANVAS. A template for thinking through assumptions and next steps for implementation.

CHECK-INS. Regular rotating sharing sessions in groups

to stimulate thought and idea exchange.

EXPERIENCE MAP. A visualization tool to capture key insights from complex interactions that a person goes through in order to accomplish a goal.

BUSINESS MODEL CANVAS: A one-page overview that lays out the value added that the organization brings to the sector.

FUTURING EXERCISE. Presented to fictitious future scenarios, participants move away from their usual discourses and mental frameworks and come up with creative ideas that can inspire innovative solutions.

The Solutions Tested

UN Women country offices and civil society partners in three regions field tested new approaches to partnership-building, resource mobilization and organizational culture and practices, in an attempt to increase resilience, sustainability and effectiveness. These fast, cheap experiments yielded some results with the potential for larger impacts in the mid to long term. They generated insightful learning that all partners are now building on.



1. MEXICO: A Catalogue of Services to Diversify Funding Sources

Challenge: How could a feminist Mexican NGO move from an exclusively donor-funded model towards a more sustainable and diversified funding base? (Opportunity area: #7)

Concept and Solution Idea: Interested in testing a more diversified funding base by boosting the selling of gender mainstreaming services to public and private actors, the Simone de Beauvoir Leadership Institute (ILSB) engaged in questioning and rethinking its business model. It hoped to expand income sources while furthering its mission. As a starting point, the group focused on improving their support for other entities to adapt ILSB's proven feminist human resources strategy, by producing a step-by-step guidance.

Testing and Iterations: A series of consultations with trusted partners allowed ILSB to see its work through the eyes of potential clients. This shed light on how clients know about, connect with and feel about the group's work. ILSB became more aware of its key activities, products, services and points of interaction with future clients, allowing it to identify new or repurposed resources.

As a result, it identified the need to improve its visibility as a service provider and decided to develop a catalogue of services. Another round of consultations and testing of the catalogue modified the language of the services offered, adapting to intended audiences. The catalogue is now undergoing a further series of iterations to better respond to ILSB's visual identity.

Results and Learning:

- As ILSB seeks to diversify its funding sources, it has sharpened understanding of its key value proposition for future clients.
- Developing the catalogue improved ILSB's selling narrative, and use of more succinct and accessible language to appeal to new audiences.
- Based on advances in the promotion of its services, ILSB is refining its service delivery model to respond to growing demand.

2. RWANDA: Mentorship to Harness Resources Among Women's Organizations

Challenge: How could East African women's organizations and social entrepreneurs share existing resources, knowledge and skills through a mentorship model? (Opportunity area: #1)

Concept and Solution Idea: The concept of fostering partnerships instead of competition among civil society organizations inspired participants at the ideation workshop to think about testing a virtual support network to harness existing knowledge and skills. The UN Women

office in Rwanda took the lead to test an organization-to-organization mentorship model for women's CSOs working on economic empowerment and social entrepreneurship. The idea consisted of creating a matching mechanism that first assesses needs and capabilities, and then pairs two or more organizations, based on criteria such as experience, skill sets or goals. Such a model would allow the exchange of intangible resources, and provide alternative resources by tapping into and redistributing existing capabilities among organizations.

Testing and Iterations: A survey assessing the needs and capabilities of women's CSOs in Rwanda revealed the limited viability of the proposed mentorship model in the country. This led to expansion to Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania to reach a critical mass of participant organizations, and tap a wider range of expertise and experience among participants.

Potential users of the mentorship system gathered for a co-design workshop in Kigali where they mapped resources and skills and further honed the model. The group developed two refined prototypes to test in each country: the "Lioness Mentorship Programme", a regional mentorship model, and the "Step Forward Challenge", a peer-to-peer exchange bringing together young professional women and small-scale entrepreneurs with

senior career women. They share advice and contacts while they walk and exercise. The latter prototype was previously tested during the "Car Free Sundays" every second weekend of the month in Kigali, where around 20 participants exchanged ideas during early morning walks. This was recommended as an innovation for adoption in other participating countries.

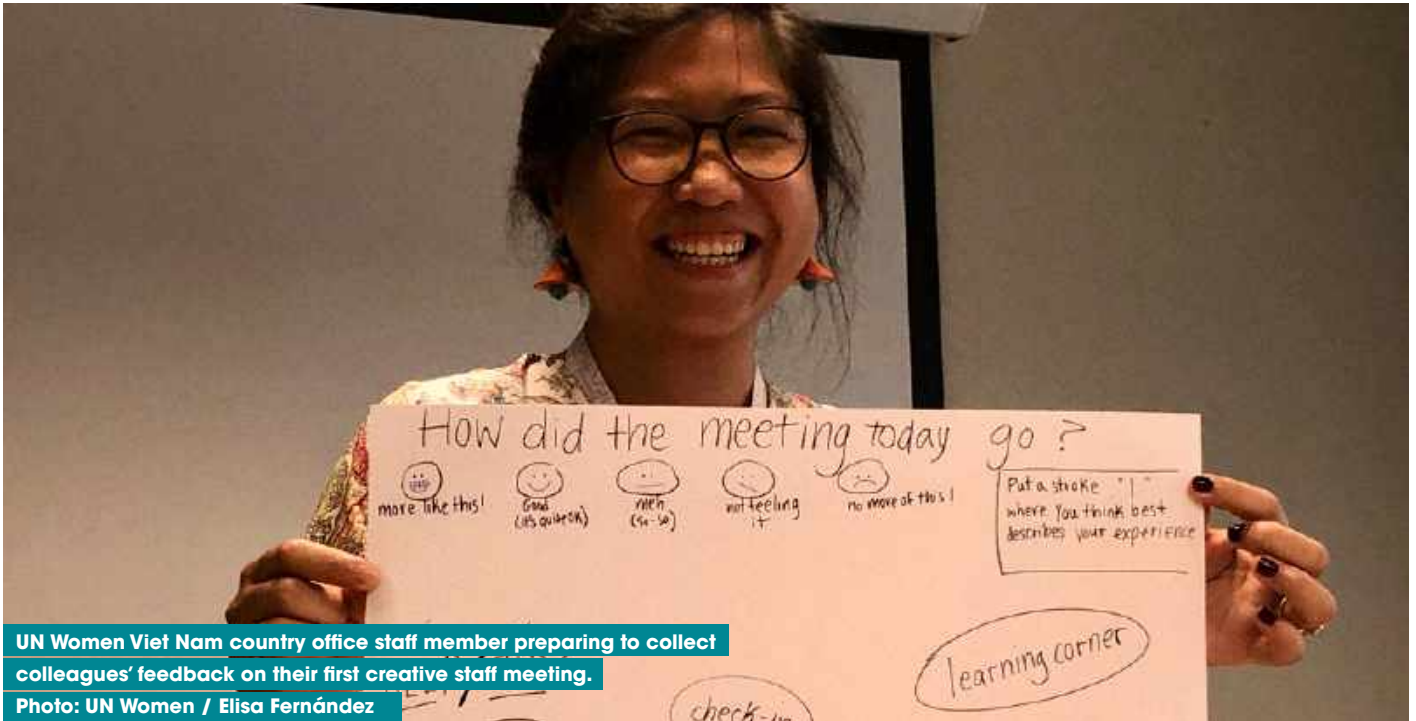
Results and Learning:

- The project defined the gaps and potential for creating platforms for South-to-South skills and mentorship exchanges.
- It helped uncover untapped skills with potential to become resources and opportunities if matched with existing needs.
- The mentoring walks, which helped some women entrepreneurs secure business opportunities in Rwanda, proved to be a quick and actionable initiative.
- The UN Women office enhanced its capabilities after learning and adopting some of the brainstorming methods from the workshop in planning processes and joint problem-solving with partners.



Participants from Rwanda, Uganda and Tanzania brainstorm about potential innovative mentorship solutions for women's organizations during a regional co-design workshop in Kigali.

Photo: UN Women / Tumaini Ochieng



UN Women Viet Nam country office staff member preparing to collect colleagues' feedback on their first creative staff meeting.
Photo: UN Women / Elisa Fernández

3. VIET NAM: New Team Meetings Methodology to Foster Creativity and Empowerment

Challenge: How could UN Women Viet Nam foster new ways of working by making creativity the norm? (Opportunity Area #5)

Concept and Solution Idea: The ideation workshop sparked high interest among participants curious about creating more spaces for experimentation, as a way to foster innovation and learning and improve effectiveness. The exchange raised a question: How could teams apply a collaborative mindset to their day-to-day work? As a prototype, they decided to start by rethinking their existing meeting culture in a way that would enhance quality and lead to more creativity. UN Women's office in Viet Nam offered to test this approach, first internally, and then expand the methodology with civil society partners if successful.

Testing and Iterations: The initial concept consisted of developing an adaptable meeting binder to foster a creative mindset. After some initial testing, the solution evolved into creating a structure for internal team meetings with a diverse array of highly participatory methodologies. These included combining traditional agenda items with others such as warm-up activities, one-minute project updates, a "learning corner" and a news commentary. After each meeting, the team would assess the session for future improvement. Colleagues became familiar with design-thinking tools such as mapping

exercises and storytelling. They went on to apply them in the co-design of an evidence-based advocacy project, and the development of the first Beijing+25 shadow review with young civil society representatives,

Results and Learning:

- Despite being relatively simple, the new team meeting model set a more personal tone for interactions, and created a safe space for new ideas and learning. Colleagues improved communications skills, and felt more comfortable asking questions and looking at their work from different angles. Some started to apply discussed ideas or tools to new projects. One colleague who organized a learning session for the team on sexual orientation and gender identity and expression concepts was empowered to then co-lead an inter-agency campaign to celebrate gender diversity, human rights and volunteerism with the participation of over 500 young students. While subtle, these changes are seeds from which deeper interpersonal connections can grow, improving team effectiveness and efficiency, and the quality of partnerships. In use with civil society partners, the design tools triggered meaningful exchanges and captured richer insights than what traditional workshops or consultation would generate.

Results Overview

Individual/Team	Relational	Institutional
<p>Safe spaces to do things differently and do different things can foster inspired and innovative individuals and teams</p>	<p>Meaningful interpersonal connections and spaces for co-creation plant seeds for stronger partnerships</p>	<p>Exploring new operational models enhances prospects for organizations to become more resilient and effective</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhanced individual staff capabilities for better strategic planning (UN Women Rwanda) Individuals take on new initiatives and apply new skills and tools in projects with external partners (UN Women Viet Nam) Better communication skills and an empowering working environment enables new ideas, learning and growth (UN Women Viet Nam) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhanced capabilities for joint problem-solving between UN Women and civil society, and among CSOs (Rwanda, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania) Opportunities for South-South exchanges and replication of effective strategies identified (Rwanda, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania) New tools capture more meaningful and rich experiences from partners (Viet Nam) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better understanding of the organization's value proposition and improved selling narrative for expanded funding sources (ILSB) Identified need to refine service delivery model (ILSB) Opportunities for new organizational resources identified (Rwanda, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania)

