

# Fondo Semillas: Wheel of Change

Evaluation of Strategic Planning  
(2016-2018)

Executive Summary



FONDO SEMILLAS  
MUJERES SEMBRANDO IGUALDAD



## Foreword

Two years ago, Fondo Semillas developed a strategic plan with important changes to its work model. Since then, we have been busy implementing these changes and seeing many of the positive results that emerged. However, we wanted to see more. We wanted to measure and improve our strategic plan and understand the opportunities to strengthen our work.

We commissioned our wonderful collaborator Eva Didier, an experienced qualitative social researcher, to guide us through this process. With Eva's support, Fondo Semillas is now able to better understand the areas of work that need to be strengthened and identify what exactly places us as a unique philanthropic entity in Mexico and in the feminist movement.

As a women's fund which finances diverse organizations and accompanies -capacity building processes, it is not easy to measure the results of a project in our field, let alone a strategic plan that includes all of our work. Yet the collective impact of our work is key to understand our role and contribution to the women's rights movement. By understanding our contribution, we also learn how to communicate it better to our grantee partners, donors and allies.

This process helped us design the next steps for our organization. We are very excited to have this report serve as a guiding document for planning our work for the next couple of years. With the adjustments that we will be making to our strategic plan, Fondo Semillas will have stronger and greater clarity in our work and the opportunities to continue building a field that is ripe for change in gender equality. Most of the recommendations that emerged from this process could also be of value to other women's funds and philanthropic institutions, which is why we decided to publish this report and share its findings with our community.

Sincerely,

**Laura García**  
**Executive Director**  
**Fondo Semillas**

## Presentation

This report's main findings show how Fondo Semillas significantly improved and strengthened its strategic role in supporting women's organizations throughout Mexico, thanks to some key initiatives implemented since its Strategic Planning process in 2016. While the full-length version of the report provides an account of our strategic recommendations as the Fund embarks on the second half of this Strategic Plan period (2019-2021), this Executive Summary focuses on key findings, laying out the way forward for Fondo Semillas to fully assume its role of strategic partner for donors, grantee-partners and allies.

## Why this report?

Fondo Semillas is the only feminist fund in Mexico: in existence for almost 30 years, the Fund is solidly anchored in the Mexican landscape and it brings funding and support to more than 500 organizations<sup>1</sup> across the country. In 2016, Fondo Semillas went through a strategic planning process with the aim of setting objectives and milestones for the Fund to achieve over the next five years, while simultaneously refining its strategic vision. A Theory of Change was also adopted as a result of this process, in order to provide the Fondo Semillas team with a compass for action and a way of assessing the Fund's success in driving change.

2018 marks the halfway point in the unfolding of the 2016-2021 Strategic Plan and therefore it gives us an opportunity to conduct an in-depth evaluation of the Fund. The objective here is two-fold: gathering learnings on the work conducted so far, as well as understanding how Fondo Semillas' contribution to the Mexican feminist movement can be further improved. This project was designed and carried out by Eva Didier, an independent researcher, in partnership with Fondo Semillas' team. Bringing several years of expertise in insights and strategy, Eva drew from previous experience working on the issue of girls' migrations in Ivory Coast to create a participatory approach, putting women (our grantee-partners, as well as their beneficiaries) at the centre of this research.

<sup>1</sup> During the period 2017-2018 from a total of 109 supported organizations, 104 of them receiving Fondo Semillas' integral accompaniment model, and the 5 remaining ones being either networks or remnant groups from a previous call for proposals, which receive donations but **not** the full model of accompaniment

Working with an independent researcher to conduct this evaluation was crucial for Fondo Semillas' team, to **bring an external perspective onto the Fund's work as well as guarantee impartiality and objectivity in reviewing its achievements and ongoing challenges**. It was also instrumental when conducting interviews with our donors and focus groups with our grantee-partners – all of which were conducted without the presence of Fondo Semillas' team members – to guarantee anonymity and overcome the **'funding effect bias'**: "true learning comes from openly discussing difficulties encountered in their work [the work of women's funds or women's organizations], yet some worry that surfacing challenges honestly and transparently can jeopardize future funding"<sup>2</sup>.

## Our approach

Considering the challenges of social impact evaluation (and specific challenges for women's funds)<sup>3</sup> highlighted by previous research, this evaluation was framed as **an opportunity for learning**. As such, we focused on **Fondo Semillas' contribution to change** (versus attribution), through its own processes and through the work of its grantee-partners. In accordance with the Fund's philosophy of promoting women's voices and agency, we also sought to **bring out women's voices and lived experiences to the fore** by prioritising a participatory and immersive approach in our research process. Acknowledging the 'Two steps forward, one step back' phenomenon<sup>4</sup>, we considered **'drawbacks'** (resistance of local authorities, of partners or family, etc.) **as meaningful manifestations of change** in our discussions with grantees and in our analysis.

<sup>2</sup> Keith-Brown, K. and Cabria, A. and Shah, S., 2013, *'Building New Approaches to Monitoring and Evaluation from the perspective of International Women's Funds'*, International Network of Women's Funds

<sup>3</sup> Batliwala, S. and Pittman, A., 2010, *'Capturing Change in Women's Realities: A Critical Overview of Current Monitoring and Evaluation Frameworks'*, Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), Toronto, Mexico City and Capetown

<sup>4</sup> "Most tools do not allow for tracking negative change, reversals, backlash, unexpected change, and other processes that push back or shift the direction of a positive change trajectory. How do we create tools that can capture this 'two steps forward, one step back' phenomenon (...)? In women's rights work, this is vital because as soon as advances seriously challenge patriarchal or other social power structures, there are often significant reactions and setbacks." Batliwala, S. and Pittman, A., 2010, *'Capturing Change in Women's Realities: A Critical Overview of Current Monitoring and Evaluation Frameworks'*, Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), Toronto, Mexico City and Capetown

And finally, to ensure we looked beyond the formal domain (e.g. macro data on women's empowerment) into **the harder-to-measure realm of cultural norms and practices**, we went one step further by including not just grantee-partners within the conversation, but the women they work with and these women's families or relatives. We organized community reunions with women, men, elders and youngsters where our grantee-partners operate to understand **the cultural shifts** (e.g. perceptions, attitudes, behaviours) **affecting women in these communities**.

To do this, we adopted a multi-stage, qualitative-led research approach: starting with a **literature review** of Fondo Semillas' key documents and hypotheses on achievements and challenges, as well as an in-depth review of specific objectives related to the Administration, Programs, Development and Communication teams. This was followed by **a series of stakeholder interviews** – with key members of the Fondo Semillas' team, some of our institutional donors, as well as some of our key 'asesoras' (strategic advisors). We then conducted a mix of **focus group discussions with grantee-partners** in different locations across the country<sup>5</sup>, **collective calls** to cover harder-to-reach geographical areas<sup>6</sup>, **individual interviews** to explore the specific issue of the tiers system more in-depth with a handful of grantees. We also had **community reunions** in the towns and villages of a select number of grantees, with members of the organizations, some of their user-beneficiaries, and their wider community.

We believe this approach rooted in feminist, participatory and appreciative inquiry principles, combined with our awareness and caution regarding potential biases in some of the data collection, allows us to deliver an in-depth strategic understanding of the Fund, **with a major 'win': going beyond a simple assessment of processes, to really challenge ourselves to understand longer-term results**. This feels critical to truly assess whether we are indeed set on generating impactful change. This will pave the way for a more strategic undertaking and renewed commitment of Fondo Semillas to achieve progress in the second half of their Strategic Planning for 2019-2021.

<sup>5</sup> CDMX, Tehuacán (Puebla), San Cristóbal (Chiapas), Las Margaritas (Chiapas)

<sup>6</sup> North of the country, including Baja California state, etc.

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We begin by reviewing the Fund's achievements in the past two years, in the context of the three core strategic objectives Fondo Semillas had set for themselves:

**1)** How Fondo Semillas has increased the skills of the Mexican feminist movement in political, social, cultural advocacy; **2)** How the Fund has improved the response to the financial needs of the feminist movement in accordance with its vision; **3)** How it built up its own feminist identity.

We then explore grantee-partners' perceptions of how these changes within Fondo Semillas have impacted them and their work, as well as donors' perceptions of how the Fund has evolved over the past few years. We then reflect on how women-human rights defenders are leading change in Mexico, as well as introduce a series of stories from women (and their relatives) who are beneficiary-users of grantee-partners' organizations. Through these stories, we examine what impact grantee partners' activities have had on their lives, and how this contributes to evolve the perception of the role of women among their communities. In the final two sections, we address elements that in our opinion, can strengthen the Fund's processes and strategies in the next following years. This culminates in the reveal of Fondo Semillas' new Theory of Change model.

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## I. A time of accelerated change & unprecedented resources

Within two years, Fondo Semillas went from about 60 to 104 grantee-partners in its current portfolio. The Fund completely renovated its accompaniment model, successfully implementing a participatory selection process (letting the Mexican feminist movement decide), an integrated model of accompaniment focused on general support across all grantee-partners to fortify their thematic as well as institutional capacities and to emphasize alliance-building as a core strategy. This is a significant achievement as the Fund has also increased its overall budget every year since 2016, consistently exceeding its own objectives. However, as the Fund has grown so quickly, there is a need to pause and reflect on whether this growth is sustainable and prioritise a deepening of our accompaniment model as well as optimizing our internal processes. But first, let's review the team's achievements over the past two years in more detail...

## I. A time of accelerated change & unprecedented resources

### Programs

As of September 2018, Fondo Semillas supports a total of 109 organizations, with 104 of these benefitting from the integral accompaniment model launched with the Strategic Planning process in 2016<sup>7</sup>. **The number of grantee-partners more than doubled between the 2016 call for proposals and the previous one**, which puts the Programs team under pressure to maintain proximity and quality of accompaniment with grantee-partners.

The team takes on the challenge brilliantly, as all Program-related objectives are met but one. For instance, across all the themes Fondo Semillas supports, there is **a significant number of 'first timers' groups supported by Fondo Semillas from 2016**, which were never part of the roster before: **out of 104 organizations, 57 are first-time Fondo Semillas grantees (54% of the total portfolio)**.

Out of the overall portfolio of grantee-partners, **48% count Fondo Semillas as their sole donor**. This points to an interesting portfolio composition of Fondo Semillas and it testifies to a real commitment to reach left out or newer organizations, but it also highlights the need for the Fund to think proactively on how best to accompany grantee-partners which are not always equipped to manage a general support type of grant.

<sup>7</sup> Organizations that were left out: Red de mujeres de la Costa Chica / Red de mujeres guerreras afromexicanas de la Costa Chica / Red de abogadas indígenas and Mujeres Aliadas / Colectivo OSA Mayor, as these organizations do not dispose of the integral accompaniment model of Fondo Semillas.

## I. A time of accelerated change & unprecedented resources

Other results suggest there is an encouraging basis to deploy a more intentional co-responsibility strategy to ensure sustainability of these organizations, as 64 of them (61% of total) generated other sources of income beyond Fondo Semillas during this last two-year grant cycle. **34 organisations (33%) specifically accessed funds from other foundations** (the others tend to receive grants from governmental institutions, or individual donors, or self-funding through commercial activities).

**The number of organizations reporting acquisition of new capacities reached 84%** - which is behind the 90% objective the Fund had set for itself. While self-reporting and incomplete data may be at fault here<sup>8</sup>, the Director of the Fund comments that this reflects “the loss of control from Fondo Semillas, or the increased autonomy it has equipped its grantee-partners with since 2016, since when completing the auto-diagnostic, grantees can decide for themselves which capacities to receiving training in”. Moving forward, we would recommend using a more granular set of capacity-building needs **per tier**, to assess how organizations are dealing with **specific capacity training needs** (this could be done by establishing a menu to choose from in the mid-term report template, to allow for a detailed break-down by type of capacity-building activities). It would also allow Fondo Semillas to offer closer support to organizations, which struggle with institutional capacity-building (common enough among the grassroots base tiers).

**“We really did not want them to feel that the self-assessment [auto-diagnóstico] was a punishment. We told them that independently from the results we shared with them, they could decide what they wanted to train in, but that they could refer to the self-assessment, because it said useful things to help them. The fact is, lots of them decided to train in thematic capacity building first. My sense is that it’s easier for them to identify their needs there.”**

*Head of Programs, Fondo Semillas*

<sup>8</sup> Data collection is reliant on grantees' self-reporting, and this estimate is based on mid-term reports, as final reports were not available at the time of research.

## I. A time of accelerated change & unprecedented resources

Fondo Semillas came up short on its goal to dedicate at least 30% of its budget to organizations not legally registered. Out of all 104 groups, **28% are not legally registered**, and a proportion of **21% of the total funds distributed to grantees-partners' organizations between January 2017 to July 2018 were attributed to unregistered groups.**

This indicates **a need for Fondo Semillas to review its objective when it comes to groups not legally registered** as it may have been too ambitious, but it also invites us to look more closely as to whether this indicator actually aligns with the objective it is designed for. Currently, **the proportion of funds distributed to unregistered groups is used as a proxy to ensure that groups with little financial means, limited institutional capacity or which refuse to legally constitute themselves out of political reasons, are actually part of the movement, ensuring diversity and funding for a plurality of feminist voices<sup>9</sup>.**

Rather than setting a fixed objective of minimum funds to be distributed to these groups, it could make more sense to track the amount & percentage of flexible funds out of total operating budget that get used each grant year for 'rescued' groups – those which would not have received funding otherwise. This feels like a more straightforward way to ensure we support movement diversity.



<sup>9</sup> Past research suggests that “Whether by choice or necessity, lack of registration often results in increased difficulty in accessing resources and heightened insecurity” FRIDA | The Young Feminist Fund & Association for Women’s Rights in Development’s Young Feminist Activism Program, 2016, *‘Brave, Creative and Resilient: The State of Young Feminist Organizing’*

## Development

The Development team conducted a multi-strand strategy over the past two years, focusing on all fronts: boosting the number and amount of donations by institutional donors, developing the network of individual donors and trying to engage corporate donors. **There has been a steady growth of the annual funds raised between 2016** (total funds raised: 32,486,455 MXN / approximately 1,332,000 USD) **and 2017** (total funds raised: 41,915,292 MXN / approximately 2,226,500 USD). What's more, **18,6% of the 2017 budget came from new sources.**

In parallel, **Fondo Semillas started a partnership with 5 new institutional donors over the course of 2016 to 2018**, outperforming its own objective of 2 new donors per calendar year. Additionally, the community of individual donors also grew (despite falling behind on the objective set in the Strategic Plan).

**“In 2014 when I started at Fondo Semillas, there was an internal discussion going on about whether it was worth continuing with the individual donors program because it was not doing very well in terms of fundraising... The decision at that time was that although the program was not necessarily that strategic for fundraising, it was important for other reasons; for example, to ensure that Fondo Semillas had the support of Mexican donors and to get people more aware of and interested in the work we were doing. So, the program continued and luckily we realized that if we invest more time and resources into the community of individual donors, we will be able to leverage much more funding. So, I think that's been a major achievement.”**

***Head of Development Fondo Semillas***

On top of raising more funds (with a specific focus on flexible funds), a strategic objective for Fondo Semillas was also to increase the overall proportion of flexible funding within the full budget make-up. While the proportion of flexible funding within the overall budget remained stable (28% of the total 2016 budget, 27% of the total 2017 budget), given the Fund's overall budget increase between 2016 and 2017, **it appears that the amount of flexible funding raised between 2016 and 2017 increased by 24%, which is a major achievement.**” But this indicator doesn't include a crucial **risk factor**, which is the composition and diversity of donors who provide flexible funding; this should be included moving forward to assess potential vulnerabilities.

## I. A time of accelerated change &amp; unprecedented resources

A key learning here is that **the ‘rescue’ strategy implemented by Fondo Semillas to provide funding for organizations whose themes are absent from donors’ agendas** –which is critical to the diversity and equity within the feminist movement– is **highly vulnerable**. Indeed, this strategy has been implemented **thanks to flexible funding support**, with Fondo Semillas being able to dedicate some of its flexible funds to ‘rescue’ some groups for which targeted, earmarked funding is currently unavailable. But as **the amount of fully flexible funding relies entirely on one single institutional donor**, the ability of Fondo Semillas to fill that gap entirely relies on the continued funding of that donor moving forward, which presents a threat to the sustainability of our model.

**“I’d say the challenge is more to try to access general or flexible support especially now as we’re doing participatory process. The only way to actually do it, is to secure flexible funding to guarantee we can support the organizations who’ve been selected through the process. Otherwise in reality we’re taking the results and double-checking against the funding we’ve got.”**

***Head of Development Fondo Semillas***

Moving forward, we see a case to be made **for semi-flexible funding**: fully flexible funding is still far from being a reality amongst institutional donors and there is some resistance to adopt it due to donors’ own reporting processes, or them being tied to a specific issue they want to allocate their funding to. In this context, it is going to be a challenge to access fully flexible funding with donors (current and new). Therefore, we see two potential ways forward here: **for new donors, promoting approach-based support** vs. project support from the beginning at proposal stage (for instance, matching funding to groups using innovative strategies, regardless of their specific area of work); for existing donors –we would recommend **advocating for core support, across specific areas of interest to donors**<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> This recommendation would highly benefit from a separate impact study to make the case strongly to donors.

## Administration

So, overall, how is the Fund delivering on its own objectives? **The implementation of the most fundamental objective has been a success**, based on this evaluation –i.e. the implementation of the new work model of Fondo Semillas (the participatory selection process, the integral accompaniment model focused on capacity-building and alliance-making, all the new tools). Yes, there is room for improvement, but we should celebrate this massive achievement, as this was delivered over only two years, while the number of grantee-partners grew exponentially.

**“Fondo Semillas was paralyzed for years, with very important issues we could not respond to, which had not been resolved during the previous Strategic Planning process. It was clear that Fondo Semillas was perceived as an old-fashioned organization, or obsolete in its thinking. And so, we assessed the potential of ideas that we liked a lot, like participatory grant-making, or general support, or having two or more specific programs rather than eight. And when the Strategic Planning arrived [in 2016], I was very pleased. One of the achievements for us was to get all these good practices within Fondo Semillas, and suddenly instead of being so obsolete, the Fund was seen as a spearhead and innovator. I think one of our very significant achievements was to reinforce this perception towards donors and out there in general.”**

*Executive Director of Fondo Semillas*

An area of improvement moving forward will be to establish a strategy in terms of Fondo Semillas' own alliance-making. Between 2016-2017, 34% of alliances were carried on from previous years, and 31% new alliances (with concrete gains or implications) were formed. The remaining 34% of alliances remained 'un-concretized' at this time.

## I. A time of accelerated change & unprecedented resources

While this result falls short on the +50% objective in new alliances, it is likely that the objective set on this indicator was too high. But more importantly it reveals **the need to establish a definition of what constitutes an alliance**. To this end, we developed **the following typology as an initial step for the team to consider**:

### Typology of Alliances:

- **Institutional strengthening alliances** (for example alliances with feminist networks such as Prospera, which aim at strengthening internal processes or tools)
- **Fund-raising opportunity alliances** (a partnership with another organization to gain access to new or additional funding sources, unavailable to the Fund on its own)
- **Strategic alliances** (with strategic advisors or other Funds, national or international, not necessarily working on women's rights, but with mutual potential benefits in terms of increasing visibility, etc.)
- **Tactical alliances** (with partners who can provide security training, venues for convening, etc.)
- **Lobbying alliances** (with partners who aim at impacting change within the Mexican civil society landscape)

Additionally, some of the changes taking place in 2016 dealt with setting new objectives for the involvement of the Board, specifically in relation to the improvement of their feminist perspective and practices within internal processes and to support the revision of the decision-making process. Input from the Board (as well as from the Operational team) was received as part of this evaluation process, and it point out to an ongoing need to keep strengthening the strategic role of the Board, in order for the entity to be able to support future team transitions and ensure the Fund's longer-term sustainability. There is also an opportunity to slow-down and pause to reflect on changes made, a reflexion which can be led by the Board to ensure that despite high-speed development, Fondo Semillas remains true to its core vision and strategic plan.

## 2. Levelling the field for women's organizations in Mexico

For many women's organizations, Fondo Semillas is unique in Mexico in promoting the autonomy of its grantees as well as consulting them as strategic partners. But this has not diluted the fundamental importance of the Fund: Fondo Semillas is particularly agile at funding the most hidden and least supported groups, which tend to remain absent from the agenda of national or international donors, ensuring the diversity and sustainability of the Mexican feminist movement. It is also worth noticing Fondo Semillas' commitment to diversify its themes: **migration is one of the key new themes** that the Fund started to support after 2016, **with a majority of first-time grantees.**

**“There are organizations which have a long-established trajectory here, but there is a lack of continuity in their activities due to lack of funding. Fondo Semillas understands this, they analyse it, and as their Director says ‘we want to continue supporting you, but it’s costing us, because it’s a difficult theme to raise funds for – not just labor rights, there are other themes that are difficult too’. But when Fondo Semillas isn’t able to source certain funds, they try to link you up with other donors, or they help you present a project to get additional funds.”**

***Consolidation, grantee-partner, Labor rights, Center***

Overall, three major changes adopted by Fondo Semillas in 2016 have had a significant impact for grantees: 1) the switch to general support; 2) the increased role for grantees within Fondo Semillas' own processes; and while still in progress, 3) the establishment of a culture of feedback between the organization and its grantee-partners. This works to anchor the contribution of grantee-partners within the Mexican feminist movement at a more strategic level.

## 2. Levelling the field for women's organizations in Mexico

### Switch to general support

Undeniably, general support has been the most significant step change for grantees: for some, it simply means they can afford to exist and operate, as a predominant number of grantee-partners from Fondo Semillas can be qualified as of a 'grassroots base' – small sized groups (with a small number of members), emergent or long-established, which have either never administrated donations before Fondo Semillas, or have been managing grants under 200,000 MXN (10,600 USD) per grant year (in general 2 years).

#### **Projection<sup>11</sup> Fondo Semillas portfolio's composition**

Out of 104 organizations:  
 Grassroots base: 62 (60%)  
 Consolidation: 23 (22%)  
 Mid-size: 19 (18%)

For many grantee-partners, receiving a general support grant has far-reaching implications: from increasing the scope and number of activities they can lead within their communities, to giving them the ability to use some of the grant for paying salaries (thereby ensuring basic sustainability) or dedicating some of the donation to capacity building. General support grants also allow grantee-partners to be much more agile and reactive to some emergency situations that can arise with the users of their services. It also permits them to invest in strategic convenings, when there is no 'project' money allocated to these – encounters which are incredibly important for movement-building and to ensure these organizations build their voice in the long-run.

**“The fact they offer general support is wonderful. It gives you much more flexibility. If an opportunity presents itself, we can take it. For example, there was a meeting in Tijuana and we didn't have enough money to cover it. It was with a group of lawyers, and that would have allowed us to reinforce our capacity in legal representation, but that group didn't have funding either for the meeting... And it was a great opportunity as they were going to invite the consulate of San Diego. Therefore, we used some of Fondo Semillas' flexible grant to not lose this opportunity, even though we didn't know this meeting was going to happen originally, so it wasn't in our proposal.”**

***Mid-size grantee-partner, Migrations, Center***

<sup>11</sup> This estimate is built on a new set of criteria established to determine which tier an organization belongs to. The criteria are as follows: number of total financial resources, consolidation level of an organization (e.g. roles are clearly attributed within the team) and number of donors. These criteria are to be reviewed and approved by Fondo Semillas.

## 2. Levelling the field for women's organizations in Mexico

### Expanded role and responsibilities offered by Fondo Semillas to grantee-partners

There has been a noted shift to a **more participatory approach from the Fund**. This shift manifests itself in particular in **the selection process that occurs every two years** (“convocatoria”). Fondo Semillas first organizes a Feminist Forum in which activists across different regions of Mexico are invited to span all issue areas and make strategic decisions on those that need to be prioritized for the next grant period; they need to take into consideration the current socio-political context, challenges and opportunities for the movement.

The participatory selection process then weighs those decisions for the next stage, where participants who passed Fondo Semillas' call for proposals<sup>12</sup> are invited to vote on other organizations' proposals. This is seen as a **major symbol of the trust** placed by the Fund in its grantees, and it earned the Fund the respect and admiration of many grantee-partners. Indeed, it is a big step forward in **giving the opportunity to each organization to understand who the other actors are, while enabling them to situate their own contribution within the broader Mexican feminist movement**.

### Emergence of a culture of feedback

In terms of other major changes noticed by grantee-partners, the openness of the Fund's members to listening and being challenged, the general flexibility on their part, has helped foster a **culture of feedback** which means that grantees feel at ease getting in touch with the team whenever they have issues. This has deeper impact than what may appear at first, as it means for instance that grantee-partners who may have trouble with some of the processes (filling in auto-diagnostic forms or mid-term reports for instance) feel comfortable enough to reach out and they encounter availability and assistance from the team.

<sup>12</sup> Organizations cannot vote for themselves

### 3. Co-leading the feminist agenda

The increased implementation of participatory processes from Fondo Semillas embodies a recognition of the growing desire of grantee-partners to play a key role in decision-making processes.

#### Fostering and nourishing alliances

There is an alignment amongst grantee-partners that Fondo Semillas plays **a key role of coordination within the movement**. The deliberate focus of the Fund on supporting alliance-building for its grantee-partners is what comes out most strongly from this research. This is supported by evidence as out of the 104 organizations supported by Fondo Semillas, 93% of them declare having established an alliance with at least someone else (more usually, another organization, or it can be with an institution such as a university or a governmental actor) in the past grant year (2016-2018). What's more, **70% of grantees report having made alliances that were specifically facilitated or generated through Fondo Semillas**.

#### Building organizational strength

While Fondo Semillas has long concentrated on capacity-building with grantee-partner organizations, one major change of the 2016 Strategic Planning was **the introduction of a new model focused on self-assessment** (the auto-diagnostic form) for the organizations. By decentralizing decisions regarding the allocation of resources, the Fund trusts grantee partners to plan their capacity building strategy based on what they see as their core needs. However, Fondo Semillas remains highly invested in increasing both thematic and institutional capacities for each organization supported. **84% of organizations within the portfolio report the acquisition of new capacities half-way through their grant period** (for the full grant period, the desired result is 90%)<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> The result of this indicator can only be **partially evaluated** at the time of this report, considering that the grant period 2016-2018 had not yet concluded, at the time of this research and final reports of progress from grantee-partners were not available. Therefore, results are provisionally based on grantee-partners' mid-term reports which, coupled with potential lack of self-reporting from grantee-partners, can reasonably lead us to expect that the objective of '90% of organizations reporting to have acquired new capacities' will be fulfilled by the end of the grant period. However, this indicator in its current shape presents serious limitations: it relies on an open-ended question for grantees to fill in as they wish, without a systematic categorization of what constitutes a newly acquired capacity, so this limits our ability to specifically point out which capacity was acquired.

Interesting patterns emerge:

- **Capacity-building needs vary according to the ‘tier’ to which the organization belongs<sup>14</sup>** – therefore we need a curated accompaniment strategy per tier.
- **Mid-size organizations operate as ‘resource hubs’ in thematic capacity building for smaller-size organizations**, which means moving forward, there could be a more deliberate strategy developed by Fondo Semillas in identifying key mid-size organizations under each theme and, with their collaboration, establish them as a key resource in terms of both capacity-building and networking for smaller grantee-partners.
- **The auto-diagnostic, as well as the ‘results card’ tools** initiated by Fondo Semillas in this first half of the Strategic Planning played a crucial role in allowing groups to have a collective internal reflexion on which capacities they need to strengthen, and which skills to acquire for their development. These tools should be maintained moving forward.

Understanding these patterns will allow Fondo Semillas to refine and nuance its accompaniment strategy, to cater more closely to the different levels of development of organizations within its portfolio, rather than following the “one size fits all” model it currently applies. Additionally, there is encouraging evidence that thanks to the accompaniment model proposed by Fondo Semillas so far, strong progress is registered in boosting organizational capacity.

<sup>14</sup> There are three tiers currently supported by Fondo Semillas: Grassroots base / Consolidation / Mid-size. Tiers are determined based on size of the organization (e.g. level of organizational consolidation and total budget administered, and in relevant cases, total number of funders).

## Not compromising on security

Across the board, there is a sense from grantee-partners that security is a key concern for Fondo Semillas, and that there's been a strong emphasis on equipping them with security protocols in the past two years, across all themes and grantee-partners. This is particularly interesting as other research suggests that **in violent contexts where feminist organizations operate, there is a trend from women defenders to deprioritize their own safety and security-related issues**<sup>15</sup>. The Fund also put in place a separate 'Rapid Response Fund' aimed at providing emergency financial support to grantee-partners who experience security threats due to human violence or natural disasters.

Moving forward, findings suggest five key opportunity areas regarding the Fund's work with grantee-partners, which broadly span operational to more macro, strategic challenges which need to be addressed:

- I. **MANAGING GENERAL SUPPORT:** while general support is seen as a major gain for grantee-partners, **managing this type of grant is not a straight-forward process for grantee-partners**. Therefore, a complex relationship to flexible funding emerges, with evidence showing this is a learning process across the board of grantees. **For some, the conviction that general support grants still come 'with strings attached' is hard to shake off**, as 'project mentality' is so deeply ingrained. Another difficulty arises when it comes to reporting to Fondo Semillas: "with general support, what do we report on?". Interestingly, this happens regardless of the organization's profile, size, level of consolidation (including mid-size organizations!), which shows **the extent to which general support is uncommon in the sector**.

Moving forward, there is an opportunity for Fondo Semillas **to do capacity training (especially via the Development team) on how to report on general support funding, based on Fondo Semillas' own experience**.

<sup>15</sup> "In particular, findings show how despite the violent and often oppressive contexts in which young feminist organizations are operating, very few identified the need for training on security and self-care, with only 8% ranking security and self-care in the 'top 3' support areas. Young feminist groups are therefore heavily interested and focused on promoting their own financial sustainability and organizational development to continue the collective struggle. It is therefore possible that as a result of this reality, they have de-prioritized their own safety and security-related issues. This 'data gap' is a critical area for continued exploration and underscores the need to build more awareness around the importance of self-care for the sustainability of the work and young feminist movements." FRIDA | The Young Feminist Fund & Association for Women's Rights in Development's Young Feminist Activism Program, 2016, *'Brave, Creative and Resilient: The State of Young Feminist Organizing'*

2. **ADJUSTING TO FONDO SEMILLAS' NEW PROCESSES & TOOLS:** for some grantee-partners, the new requirements generated by Fondo Semillas in 2016 –especially the different forms (auto-diagnostic, mid-term and final reports...)– **have caused administrative work overload.** While this depends on the level of consolidation of the organization and internal capacities, this is most often a challenge for organizations whose main strategies are street action, or rural workshops in remote locations. These groups often do not have an office, or a computer, and they tend to be more hands-on on activities, therefore the administrative side of things (reporting, etc.) can be felt as burdensome, or a distraction, pulling them away from the field.

There is a need for Fondo Semillas to keep explaining to grantee-partners why this extra administrative work load matters, and how it can capacitate them for future opportunities (for instance, highlighting how they are acquiring reporting skills that they may need in the future to establish links with other donors). But this should also open a reflection for Fondo Semillas on whether new or alternative ways of reporting may be more suited for organizations which are not 'desk-based' (e.g. digital diaries via Whatsapp for those without ready access to a computer). Another implication moving forward is the need to **better systemize grantees' information.**

3. **ASSESSING & REPORTING PROGRESS:** This remains a core difficulty for all, including for most advanced mid-size organizations –which is mirrored by Fondo Semillas's own challenges when it comes to monitoring and evaluating progress. There is a shared difficulty to establish good practices when it comes to collecting data, and for those which have ways to establish more robust data collection, to know how to go beyond measuring processes to truly evaluate results and know how to communicate those.

**“I think it's crucial, as we need to be able to evaluate ourselves. But we need to learn how to report results, not just activities. For instance, if we do six workshops, what is the impact? From that realization, we built some indicators to understand the impact on the beneficiary population and also because our donors kept telling us 'but what's going on with the women?'. Honestly, monitoring and evaluation is hard, when you come from an activist background, it's not something you learn, so we have to capacitate ourselves –we'd love to.”**

*Mid-size grantee-partner, Migrations, South*

This points to an opportunity to think more creatively and innovatively on how we measure and communicate results. This does not just matter from a donor's perspective, but it is also critical for both Fondo Semillas and grantee-partners to have the reassurance that their work is indeed generating change, and to identify which strategies or activities are more conducive of this than others. With this in mind, we think there is an opportunity for Fondo Semillas to consult mid-size grantee-partners more actively on indicators we want to implement. This could be done for example through a convening with a select number of mid-size partners, revising what Monitoring & Evaluation initiatives are currently underway, key challenges and how some partners may have resolved them. It would also be useful to discuss what evaluation mechanisms may have been most relevant and implementable at **past stages of development** for these organizations –in order to trickle down learnings and develop adequate capacity training for grassroots grantee-partners.

4. **RENEWING LEADERSHIP:** Generational 'friction' around leadership renewal is a key issue to address in the next years. Often presented as an 'ongoing challenge', the topic of youth and leadership came out spontaneously in the field with grantee-partners. Current cultural notions of leadership are not always conducive to team renewal, or for elders to see the positive benefits of opening up to younger generations. **Leadership is conceived as experience accumulated (or time served!), and there is not always evidence of a desire to share it with new or younger members.** Of course there are **real barriers within the organization to pass on leadership:** it requires considerable time and work that leaders do not always have the luxury to take on. There can be a perceived lack of commitment from the younger generation, which can fuel reluctance, and there is often an uncertainty regarding the ability of young people to 'adapt' to a specific and distinctive type of leadership.

This is a key opportunity for Fondo Semillas to **focus on this cross-thematic issue in a more deliberate way** in the next half of the Strategic planning. For instance, leadership training and talks on cross-generational organizational culture could be proposed as part of institutional capacity building, with a focus on inviting both organizations' current leaders and younger members. Of course, participation should be based on interest, given topic sensitivity.

5. **BRIDGING THE 'AUTONOMY VACUUM':** One of the revised objectives of the 2016 Strategic Plan is the shift from an 'exit strategy' to what is now coined as an '**autonomy strategy**'. This refers to the objective of Fondo Semillas to support its grantee-partners to develop their sustainability through a diversification of funding, which they would receive directly, without intermediaries. However, many of the grassroots groups are struggling with the idea that the grant may cease one day, and that is a key source of anxiety. What findings suggest here is a feeling –prevalent among those which have been with Fondo Semillas for more than a grant's cycle– that they are **the responsibility of Fondo Semillas**. But this is paired with a sense of urgency and **a desire to see more proactiveness from Fondo Semillas in helping them prepare for the future**. This is particularly the case in areas and themes where fundraising is a challenge (for example labor rights, sex work and, to a lesser extent LBT rights).

While it is important to clarify with grantee-partners what the Fund can and cannot do –for instance, some grantee-partners (which are not economic cooperatives) request funding to develop productive activities to generate sustainable auto-funding, which may not always sit well with Fondo Semillas' funding principles –it is important to **co-design concrete alternatives**. Currently, while the strategy is part of the arsenal of objectives built in 2016, no initiatives or calls to action have been led by the Fund in that sense, and it is urgent to address it –potentially in cross-consultation with other funds and institutional donors to trial solutions.

## 4.A philanthropist pioneer

There is a strong solidarity between Fondo Semillas and donors who believe in and support movement-building as a fundamental strategy to generate long-lasting change. These donors tend to support ‘movement-based’ approaches, paired with a focus on some of the long established ‘core’ feminist issues (e.g. abortion, LBT rights...). As such, there is a natural alignment and clarity between these donors and Fondo Semillas.

**“We have a strong commitment to women’s funds and to the women’s fund model because we believe it is strengthening the movement, we have a very deliberate movement building approach within our program and we fund organizations we believe are movement-builders. Fondo Semillas features very strongly in that sense.”**

### *Institutional Donor*

- Across the board **for all donors**, there is a perception that Fondo Semillas has a **committed intersectional feminist focus within Mexico** (through the work of the Fund with indigenous women, Afro-Mexican women, Migrants, LBT...).
- Similarly to grantee-partners’ observations, donors feel like **Fondo Semillas is ‘bridging’ a gap in the funding ecosystem, allowing them to reach small, grassroots, local organizations in Mexico** (this has a strategic importance, as the fiscal context in Mexico is prohibitive when it comes to financing organizations which do not possess the authorized legal status to receive donations).
- Linked to this, there is a recognition across donors of **the capacity and agility of Fondo Semillas to navigate a challenging tax framework** and to operate as a reliable and efficient partner in this area.
- Donors recognize and **celebrate the effort and success led by the Development team in diversifying the Fund’s donor base in the past years** –in particular, they praise the innovative thinking around developing a larger individual donors’ network, as well as thinking creatively around corporate partnerships as a way to ensure longer-term sustainability.
- Finally, for the most enthusiastic donors, Fondo Semillas also distinguishes itself by **its collaboration with other actors in the field**: it is seen by most as a generous knowledge sharing contributor (Fondo Semillas’ presence at women’s funds forums is significant here, as well as its collaboration with the AWID<sup>16</sup> and Prospera<sup>17</sup> networks).

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.awid.org/>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.prospera-inwf.org/>

“Since their current strategic plan was a real departure, they made really bold changes in terms of how they organize their work, do their grants and see their role, and it takes a lot of courage to depart from how you’ve operated. I feel often strategic planning processes are about validating what you’ve been doing and continuing on that path; it’s refreshing to see an organization that is bold and daring and looks at what’s happening internally and sees how that can apply to what they’re doing in their areas of work. All of those and other ideas require bold vision, we fund maybe 15 funds at this point –they all do amazing work, but in some ways Fondo Semillas is really setting themselves apart as a model and pioneer.”

*Institutional Donor*

There is also a consensus on some of the challenges the Fund needs to tackle in the next years:

- **The need for a Monitoring & Evaluation system:** while not unique to Fondo Semillas, there is little sense that the Fund has taken steps to remedy this –and it often gets mentioned when it comes to reporting results at a more strategic level.
- The need to **increase strategic alliances between Fondo Semillas and other key Mexican organizations**<sup>18</sup>, to ensure greater impact and better use of resources (not just financial, but also knowledge, public policy lobbying...). This is key for all donors. This is also evidenced in the fact that the Fund is coming up short on the objective they set here (2017 saw an increase of 31% of new alliances, and 2018 an increase of 42%, instead of the annual objective of +50% set by the Fund).

But in general, for donor ‘allies’, the Fund has **a clear theoretical vision coupled with a practical approach**. For these donors, this is evidenced by the focus of the Fund on its accompaniment model and capacity building strategy –both deemed of vital importance. Similarly, the perceived emphasis on a participatory grant-making process is seen as a commitment from the Fund to ‘walk the talk’, by innovating within its own feminist practices. As such, there is **a greater degree of understanding, support and positivity around Fondo Semillas putting so much effort into these processes**.

<sup>18</sup> Especially with actors such as ILSB <https://ilsb.org.mx/> or ProDESC <http://www.prodesc.org.mx/index.php/es/>

## 5. An opportunity to fully realize our strategic potential

For some donors, whose core work encompasses themes beyond gender justice, or whose areas of intervention depart from traditional feminist issues, there is a striking sense that more strategic reflection is required from Fondo Semillas, in order to clearly establish its role in the ecosystem. According to them, **efforts need to be focused on defining a clear strategy in relation to the theme(s) they are funding through Fondo Semillas.** While there is an agreement among the Fondo Semillas team that the strategy in some specific thematic areas needs to be strengthened, it is still important to bear in mind that Fondo Semillas' approach in building the feminist movement is not necessarily aligned with that of these donors.

Another aspect worth considering is that this cohort of donors forms a **heterogenous group**, and while their perceptions regarding Fondo Semillas are similar, the drivers behind these perceptions vary widely. For instance, some donors have focused for a significant period of time on the specific theme they are supporting via Fondo Semillas, and they are more advanced on their journey in defining the strategy for this issue. This has been **more prevalent in areas or themes that have come more recently to the feminist agenda in Mexico** (e.g. land, eco-feminism, work).

On these issues, there is a consensus among the Fondo Semillas team around the need to impart more strategic guidance and to receive support by both donors and strategic advisors to strengthen their own understanding of the theme. While this will take time, some initiatives are being put in place and trialled –for example, using an established mid-size grantee to operate as a strategic advisor under the guidance of Fondo Semillas' Programs team.

**“I think it can be done: we have to continue developing strategies and we have to acknowledge that it will take some time. The feminist agenda on reproductive and sexual rights, abortion... took many years to develop and receive international funding. And these issues are the ones contained in the feminist agenda! In Mexico, you have to recognize that the eco-feminist agenda does not have this history, neither does the environmental agenda.”**

***Strategic Advisor***

## 5. An opportunity to fully realize our strategic potential

Moving forward, this also reveals an opportunity for Fondo Semillas to **sharpen its communication and evidence-based reporting for donors who are not intrinsically aligned with our vision**. It also sets out the imperative of **becoming fluent in switching across donors' audiences**, by thinking more strategically about who the audience is and about their work model (e.g. is this a donor who is more 'movement-building based' or issue-based? Human-rights or development orientated?).

**“I think the more they’re diversifying their funders, how they can talk about their work in a way that is not the kind of feminist movement lingo will be important... it will be beneficial to them in terms of broadening their basis of support... I don’t see it as losing your commitment to the work, I think it’s just learning how to translate that work into different kind of results for diverse groups... who don’t have an explicit frame around rights. They need things to be in development terms rather than rights terms, so I think that’s an area that they can improve on, and I think there’s awareness of it.”**

*Institutional Donor*

Findings suggest five key changes that need to take place for Fondo Semillas to be able to truly operate as a strategic partner for ‘the doubters’ as well as attract new donors:

- 1. TRACK CHANGE IN MORE INNOVATIVE AND EFFECTIVE WAYS:** This is the most urgent and important challenge for Fondo Semillas. Despite the accepted notion that ‘it is hard for all women’s funds’, a sense that more could be done by the Fund, and it impacts credibility with donors who are less on board to start with. The adoption and current implementation of the Impact Mapper tool<sup>19</sup> is likely to have a positive impact on reporting but keeping abreast of most innovative and creative ways of evaluating results with grantee-partners (beyond processes) will be important so as not to fall behind, as new thinking is constantly emerging in the field.
- 2. COMMUNICATE AROUND THE TIERS SYSTEM STRATEGY:** While this has been trialled mainly within the Body program so far (especially with abortion grantees as this is a familiar and well-established theme within the Fund), the tiers

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.impactmapper.com/>

## 5. An opportunity to fully realize our strategic potential

strategy system yields interesting results –with more groups of different sizes and consolidation levels bringing support and capacity-building to one another, allowing Fondo Semillas to fully inhabit its role as facilitator and coordinator. While prioritizing strategy definition in themes falling under the Land or Work programs is key, the tiers strategy could be piloted with some grantee-partners under these themes later down the road. Communicating this to donors is key: this will help uplift Fondo Semillas' status as strategic partner, as well as demonstrating the Fund's commitment to proactive initiatives.

**3. MORE ONBOARDING OF DONORS IN THE FIELD:** as well as inviting donors to strategic events, it is important to onboard them in the field on some grantee-partner visits or during the selection process (especially the Feminist Forum) when grantee-partners themselves debate to fix the priorities for action and funding in the next two years. **Helping to short-cut intermediaries between international donors and local organizations** and getting across a sense of priorities for the movement could be crucial.

**4. DO NOT DO EVERYTHING ON YOUR OWN:** Importantly, there is a sense among donors that the Fund can be too self-centred in its approach to challenges and not always looking up to donors as a strategic resource in itself –one which can connect them with other organizations or recommend strategic advisors.

**5. PROMOTE THE LEADING ROLE OF FONDO SEMILLAS WITHIN MEXICAN CIVIL SOCIETY:** The bulk of donors' reports is often based on the work led by the Programs team and grantee-partners. However, there is much strategic work being conducted by the Fund outside of this. Moving forward, there is an opportunity to communicate **Fondo Semillas' role in (re)shaping some of the debates animating Mexican civil society**. For instance, the leadership role taken by Fondo Semillas in lobbying authorities in order to amend the legal tax framework, through the UnidOSC project; or the fact that the participatory selection process inspired other foundations in Mexico <sup>20</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> “The recent experience of Fondo Semillas's participation in UnidOSC and the Frente contra la Impunidad, two coalitions that aim to improve the environment for philanthropy and civil society in Mexico in response to restrictions and corruption, have allowed us to see that the Fund is becoming an increasingly important voice and a point of reference among civil society organizations in Mexico. The potential that Fondo Semillas has to influence charity-oriented donors and other civil society organizations in Mexico is huge, as evidenced by the fact that organizations such as Ambulante, Fundación ADO, Fundación Tichi Muñoz, and Fundación Merced have all taken into account Fondo Semillas's community and gender focus when designing their own programmatic work.” – Fondo Semillas Year 2 Progress Report to Institutional Donor

## 6. Clarifying our role on the public stage

Fondo Semillas comes out as a key actor in the long-established issues of the feminist movement (such as sexual and reproductive rights, indigenous identities, etc). There is also a clear sense that **the Fund is committed to feminist accompaniment**, defined as respecting the grantee-partners' autonomy and leadership.

**“Fondo Semillas is very clear about being a fund, as such they can support projects but they don’t want to intervene in the life of the organizations –it’s not like a network. I think they try to give a lot of respect to the organizations they work with, which I think is good, they give them resources but it doesn’t imply that the organizations owe them obedience. They are tactful and show respect for their partners”.**

*Fondo Semillas’ Strategic Advisor*

However, some grantee-partners, who tend to operate within particularly violent and targeted issues (LBT, sex work), believe that Fondo Semillas could take a stronger stance on these issues, which is mirrored by some donors' expectations for Fondo Semillas to be more visible. This perceived reluctance from Fondo Semillas on taking a public stand makes the organization 'invisible' in the media landscape for some of its donors.

This is of critical importance, as it alludes to the role of a Fund: **Fondo Semillas strongly believes it is not its role as a Fund to take a public stance on certain issues.** This is due to two reasons: on one hand, **the Fund sees its mission as amplifying the voice of its grantee-partners** (not its own); on the other hand, taking a public stance on certain issues which are divisive within the feminist movement risks alienating potential groups which apply for funds and therefore would threaten the Fund's commitment to support the diversity of feminist voices within the movement. However, **this can be interpreted by donors as a failure on behalf of Fondo Semillas to lead the feminist agenda in Mexico.** As the rationale for Fondo Semillas' position is not always made clear or even known by some donors, there is an important need to communicate this proactively.

## 7. Learning from ‘defensoras’

Women who become active members within women’s organizations are the best ambassadors for showing how organizations supported by Fondo Semillas generate tremendous change. While few of them are activists or human-rights defenders to start with, they all become so as they take on a more permanent role within the organizations they’ve joined. Changes spill much beyond the organizational sphere, to affect their whole life: personal and professional, collective and intimate.

### Why do they join women’s organizations?

For many women we met over the course of this research, there is often a sense they are reaching ‘breaking point’ (or have indeed been there for a while) when they decide to take a first step towards joining a women’s organization. This happens either **through a ‘proxy’** –another woman they know, who is an active member of the organization and for whom they have witnessed positive changes–, or via what they describe as an **‘intervention’** –an ad on the local radio, a leaflet, hearing about the organization at their place of work... Overwhelmingly, we got an insight into how **these women live through histories of abuse, both in their personal and professional spheres**. And for many, these spheres can be heavily intertwined, affecting them through to their deepest sense of self.

**“I lived for 9 years with a violent, aggressive person who used to attack me. He said, ‘don’t go to see those women.’ I left, I cried, I realized the damage I was causing my children. I told myself ‘I’m with him for them’ but I didn’t understand I was with him because I ‘wanted’ to be. Joining the collective gave me the chance to get away, to be among a group that helped me. I’m not alone anymore and I know that life is not all for suffering. It’s been 1.5 years now and it’s already served me. Now I speak up, I say what I want.”**

*Woman Human Right Defender, Labor rights, Center*

A significant trigger for some women –although much more work has been done elsewhere, and would be required here to fully contextualize the importance of this finding– is the realization that their own mothers themselves had been exploited in abusive situations or contexts, and as this realization dawns, **they want to break the cycle of abuse for their own daughters and children, which is a massive trigger to take action**, and is instrumental in inciting them to join a women’s organization.

“I have an 8-year-old daughter who tells me ‘Mama, I’m going to create a union for workers so that they respect my rights when I grow up’ –that’s what I call change!”

*Woman Human Right Defender, Domestic workers, Center*



What does belonging to a women’s organization bring them?

Many women talk about their participation within the organization as **a life altering experience**, that leads them to **a deep introspection**, and from which **they emerge stronger, with a more solid sense of who they are and an awareness of their rights** in ways that were previously unknown and inaccessible to them. The metaphor of ‘living with your eyes closed’ in Tzotzil language (Chiapas region) was often used to explain to us what this is like:

**“Before joining [the organization], she completely had her eyes closed... The obedience of women –it is like this in the community. I was always sad because there was no other way to live, to change, there was lot of violence against women and it was a process to make women aware that it was not good that they were beaten up, that they had to denounce the violence.”**

*Woman Human Right Defender, Sexual and reproductive rights, South*

As we’ve seen, a recurring theme across women who join women’s organizations is the gradual awareness that their own situation is not as they believe –and **the discovery that they have rights in the first place is often paramount**, before even getting to the realization that these rights are not respected.

**“It’s only when I got to the organization and started learning my rights, that I realized mine were not as good as I thought, I worked in a small room with no ventilation... So, I came to the organization with a need to know, and I learned little by little... among other things, in the area of training, in the area of human and labor rights. Many times, we go to work in those places out of necessity, for having a salary, or for our children’s studies, but we do not know if it is worth staying in that particular place or not.”**

*Woman Human Right Defender, Domestic workers, Center*

But as members of such organizations, instead of hopelessness setting in, **there is a sense of resistance**: they now feel equipped and supported by the women’s group to organise, even if they are at this stage simple members of the organization (e.g. without a specific role within the team). This underscores the importance of enrolling, as a first step. This point is worth making, if only to underline how much of a massive leap ‘belonging’ to such organizations embodies: at core, it breaks the sense of isolation and powerlessness, giving women a sense of direction and for the most proactive ones, self-accomplishment.

Another common result of joining a woman’s organization is a **feeling of emancipation** –which often manifests through taking some distance from the husband figure. Some women defenders link their ability to dissociate themselves from an unhealthy relationship, through either divorce or separation, to this newly found sense of independence through the organization. Often, this ability to act upon a tough decision is described as made easier because of **the support they found amongst the other women within the organization, “their community”**. For many, being

acknowledged as a member of the group is described as a manifestation of sorority: beyond fortifying organizational processes, it also has far-reaching personal, individual implications. Indeed, it provides them with a **sense of self-esteem** and **emotional safety**, through knowing that there are other women in the same situation and that they can work together against a situation of oppression.

**“The collective is very committed to continue to give women the tools, so that they can know their human rights and their labor rights, but it is also important to acknowledge it is a process, that at the end of the day, they don’t blame themselves. We, as women, should not blame ourselves, in this time and place, we are not the ones who are guilty. It is everyone’s fault, men, laws, brands, institutions... We are not guilty of living in violence. Our work with the organization helps us moving forward, but we still lack a lot, we do not want our children to live in these conditions, the idea here is to learn and transmit to them, so they can live differently, they can live a life without violence.”**

*Woman Human Right Defender, Labor rights, Center*

What does belonging to a women’s organization allow them to do?

Interestingly, for many women **the impact of the activist experience is not self-contained within the organization’s walls, the changes spill to many other areas of their life.** For example, they notice how after a while of being members in the organization, **they become gradually aware of their voice. And how they can use this voice** to oppose, negotiate, disagree. At the personal level, women mention their increased ability to navigate tension or cope with stigma within their own families. Some women also talk about a trickle-down effect and how their relatives have come to evolve their views gradually.

**“My dad used to say, ‘we are servants’. It has been my turn to educate him. Now, my dad is who supports me the most... He helps me, which gives me a lot of strength, now he supports me a lot, my husband not so much, but my children and grandchildren they support me too... that really is a sign that it’s worth keeping on fighting”.**

*Woman Human Right Defender, Domestic workers, Center*

At work, they talk of an increased capacity to face discrimination or oppression in professional contexts (against abusive employers in the case of domestic workers, or against exploitative companies in the case of factory workers).

For many of the women we spoke to, joining women’s organizations changes their lives in deep, initially unforeseen and far-reaching ways. They gain tools to deal with everyday situations (negotiation skills, communication skills, knowledge, confidence, empathy and perspective), and a way to cope with their own personal history and understand it from a kinder perspective, without guilt or self-blame.

## When the wheel of change gets bogged down

Throughout the research, in particular in the South of the country where many indigenous communities are concentrated, **considerable emphasis is put on preserving traditions**. This can be a double edged-sword though, as on one hand it aims at preserving one’s identity from erasure or swallowing within the mainstream, but on the other hand, **it can also be a block to challenge damaging norms for women in these communities**. This is compounded by the fact that there are **not many visible ‘positive deviance’ women role models** in general (e.g. women who have followed a different path from the norm and can offer inspiring role models for young girls). However, the most tangible examples of positive deviance for these young girls are the women leaders or promoters present in the area from the organizations supported by Fondo Semillas.

**“It’s the same in another community, the only role that some women have is that they are promoters for example of [Fondo Semillas’ grantee-partner], and that is a more active role, that is the change that they see, but it is still very slow. But they look at that information and it helps that women are taking on these roles, that women are playing a part in the communities. It is good that women participate here because women begin to recognize their rights, their strengths and take more of their own decisions.”**

***Woman Human Right Defender, Sexual and reproductive rights, South***

We also observe key generational differences, in the South indigenous communities where young women are more likely to speak Spanish (on top of the local languages –Tzotzil, Tzeltal, etc.) as they had more exposure to the world outside the immediate confines of the town or village, and they are clearly equipped with greater self-confidence from a younger age compared to their mothers’ generation. This is often recognized by older women in the community:

**“I think the mentality of young people has already changed, it wasn’t like that before. I see it with my daughter... the young people are already coming equipped with this information. When I was in high school, those themes were not talked about before [e.g. early pregnancy, protected sex...], but the young people already have an idea that it will serve them.”**

*Woman Human Right Defender, Sexual and reproductive rights, South*

It is also important to recognize that there is a strong intersection of abuse –on top of patriarchal systems of oppression, racial and classist systems are also at play here. Oppressive class systems affect not just women, but men too, which was particularly obvious in the South of the country (Chiapas) where poverty levels are amongst the highest in Mexico. However, it also challenges us to think from a place of plurality: how different feminisms coexist and how to anchor our reflection and strategies from within the lived experiences of women.

Nowhere is this more obvious than within economic cooperatives in the South of the country. As a specific case of women’s organizations, with many women who first join doing so in order to generate a livelihood, the role of women-led economic cooperatives within the feminist movement is an interesting one to interrogate:

**“Some of the organizations’ members consider themselves feminists, some not. They work in the defence of women, but there is still no consensus that they are all feminists. It’s a discussion that we’ve had for a long time, but I think it’s a process that they must have at their own pace. We think ‘feminism’ is a word that has been built from within a Western perspective and our members are just building their own feminism, and maybe we’re not going to even use that word. We come from different communities, there are words that we do not know, some of us lack the knowledge of what the concept even means. It’s not that it’s rejected, we do not know yet if we want it that way or if we are going to build it or change it. We fight for the defence of women’s rights, the cooperative is completely managed by women, the center is run by women and with an idea of feminist autonomy. But we believe that it is very important that the internal process of reflection takes place at its own pace and that our feminist ideology needs to be constructed from within our own practices.”**

*Consolidation grantee-partner, Economic cooperative, South*

## 8. Evolving cultural norms for Mexican women

Among women who are service users or beneficiaries of women's organizations, cultural change takes place more slowly. It can also take meandering paths as patriarchal norms are so deeply ingrained, and traditions are so highly valued (especially in a country where indigenous identity is under assault). The feelings of the women we spoke to, regarding their own lived experience, are **often much more tinged with resignation, even though a lot of hope is placed upon the idea that things are changing in their communities.**

There is also an **obsession with 'respecting my rights' within the discourse of both men and women** –which often seems to act more as a proxy to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' people within the community, rather than lending itself to a real understanding of the implications. But there are encouraging signs that cultural norms and beliefs especially around issues such as women's sexuality, pregnancy, marriages or informal unions are shifting. Additionally, there is a clear sense of accelerated change among younger generations. We can share here a few stories that emerged during our research<sup>21</sup>:

### **Case 1: Older women, married, housewives, South (Rosalía, Guadalupe & María)**

"We talked about how things have changed here. Much has changed, because we know which our rights are now. We have rights as women, as domestic workers, as wives. Before, our husbands used to forbid things, control women a lot. Maybe there were such organizations like this one [local Fondo Semillas' grantee-partner], that could have been a source of support, but we participated very little regardless, maybe out of fear. We have learnt those things, our rights and we have found other women who know their rights, too. They tell us 'don't let it happen' or 'stand up for yourself'.

"I participate in many workshops so that I can make the information go out to other people. Of course, I like the workshops a lot, if I don't come it's not because I don't like them, but because of the lack of time, I have much work at home.

"For me, equality it's not the women first, or the men first, we are equal. What men do, I feel like I'm capable of doing it –and there are things my husband can't do either anyway! But I see many men who are much worse. Before I was never coming out of my home, and even though now we talk a lot about the topic of women's rights around here, I know that for the majority, they still think that we are not equal. But we keep going, we keep sharing the information."

<sup>21</sup> More case studies can be found in the full-length report.

## 8. Evolving cultural norms for Mexican women



## 8. Evolving cultural norms for Mexican women

### Case 2: Parents, South (Esperanza & Pedro)

“Before, women did not decide to plan when they were going to have children. Now, since [local Fondo Semillas’ grantee-partner] is here, the majority does. Also, many parents are sending their children to school now, but previously some families had up to 12 children and so they could not support them to go to school. Now that they are planning, there is better support for the children too. Before men did not want women to plan or have a dialogue with their partners about it.

“We see also in two municipalities around here, in Chalam, some of the young people are waiting up to 21 years to get married. There is still a lot of work to do, but it is better let’s say. We like it here [the organization] because, from the training you receive, we have managed to sensitize men and women in our community. But it’s true that although some men achieve that change, violence is still going on in some communities. In our personal lives, it helps us too: our eldest daughter decided she didn’t want any more children and we could support her in front of her husband. There is more equity and respect between men and women.

“Another change is that some parents respect more the decisions of their children not to marry, before there were more parents which forced marriage ‘you get married because I say so’ –that has changed a little. And this comes from the training we receive here. The information that they [organization] are sharing in these communities has helped us to make better decisions, to do family planning. And don’t forget the fact that it’s all translated in our language: it helped us to better understand. The information is getting more into the communities: it’s recognized now that maternal death is a problem in the community and the midwives have changed and channelled this information.”



**Case 3: Men, married, single & partnership, South**

“Women here always have been dedicated to the home: cooking, etc. While men work in the field, women have their jobs. But we all have rights, if they want to work, we support them. What’s changed is that they stand up for their rights, as women, as well as their obligations, take care of the home, look after others. They express what they want to say, they can go out, share, participate.

The rights are: the right not to be mistreated –not only as a woman but as a man too. The right to come here, to learn. I see that women are more animated, they have more encouragement to participate in public, they lose their fears, leaving behind that’s the way it is, that’s how it is!”

**Autonomous decision-making is one of the most important changes that affect women in communities, and it’s more prevalent amongst younger women.** For younger generations –both men and women– we see a change in mentalities that can be attributed partly to the work of women’s organizations in the area: a higher concern to prevent early pregnancy, with promoters reporting more awareness and use of condoms, attempts at spacing out pregnancies more and waiting longer to get wed. This has a trickle-down effect, as with more effective pregnancy planning for instance, people report being able to send their kids to school for longer.

**However, we can’t ignore that all participants in our community reunions came on a voluntary basis, which does not fully capture the extent of the resistance or rejection of the work of women’s organizations inside the community.** Participants mention it: ‘there are still men beating up their wives’ or ‘still, a lot of people don’t believe in equality between men and women’. Change is slow and takes time. To overcome this, **women’s organizations are to succeed only if they manage to have a strong and continued local imprint and can demonstrate how much they do for the communities.** Women’s organizations play an interesting role: **they are a social force, bringing women together outside of the traditional home space where they are bound, in order to do something new.**

Even though it is difficult to fully gauge (as people who took part in the research are likely to be supporters), it is fascinating to observe the spread of beneficiaries: beyond women who are the obvious audience, some regular curious bystanders are older men who are keen to learn, ‘proud to be opening their mind’, as one participant told us. This is supported by this anecdote from a local women’s organization in Chiapas, mentioning how the men in a nearby village were asking ‘when are the women from

## 8. Evolving cultural norms for Mexican women

[local organization] coming back?'. As we've observed, in the South of the country in particular, **there is a real call from women's organizations to also work with men** on gender violence, early pregnancies, abortion, etc.

So, norms are evolving, but slowly –and it is easier to identify progress within the spheres of what has traditionally been regarded as 'women's issues', e.g. pregnancies, child birth, etc. However, change does not happen in isolation –women daring to challenge their husbands and stepping outside of the home is seen across the board. From older to younger, men and women, younger girls stepping up as active members of women's organizations, being as outspoken and confident to speak their minds as their male counterparts: this all feels radically new and paving the way for change to blossom.

## 9. Moving to the four-tiers system

There is much promising and exciting potential in the strategy that Fondo Semillas wants to implement in the near future –the organization of its portfolio of grantee-partners in four tiers: grassroots base, consolidation, mid-size and large organizations. We developed a set of characteristics to identify each one of the tiers, as well as a curated set of alliance-making and capacity-building needs which will help move beyond the current ‘one-size-fits-all’ strategy, in order to further improve the quality of the accompaniment model of the Fund moving forward<sup>22</sup>.

### Core criteria to consider for classifying organizations within tiers

Together, these criteria provide reliable information to determine which tier an organization belongs to<sup>23</sup>:

- **Financial resources:** the maximum amount of money the organization is managing in total (Fondo Semillas’ grant as well as other funding)
- **Number of donors** within the organization’s roster<sup>24</sup>
- **Consolidation level of the organization:** how roles are distributed and clearly defined across team members

### Secondary criteria

These criteria are useful to track the development of the organization:

- The **existence and implementation of a Strategic Plan** (or whether the organization is in the process of developing one)
- **Shared leadership among the management team**<sup>25</sup>: for instance, there is a rotation planned within the Strategic Planning process, different team members are doing capacity-building training on a regular basis
- **Number, type and results of alliance-building strategy**

<sup>22</sup> Detailed tiers archetypes and specific alliance-building needs can be found in the full-length report.

<sup>23</sup> To be integrated ahead of the selection process (‘convocatoria’) within software Impact Mapper.

<sup>24</sup> We recommend losing this criterion for organizations which tend to be financed through flexible financing, given there is little to no dedicated funding in this area, the number of donors won’t provide meaningful information.

<sup>25</sup> For Grassroots base groups which are arts/culture-led organizations, we can disregard Strategic planning and shared leadership, less relevant for this type of organizations.

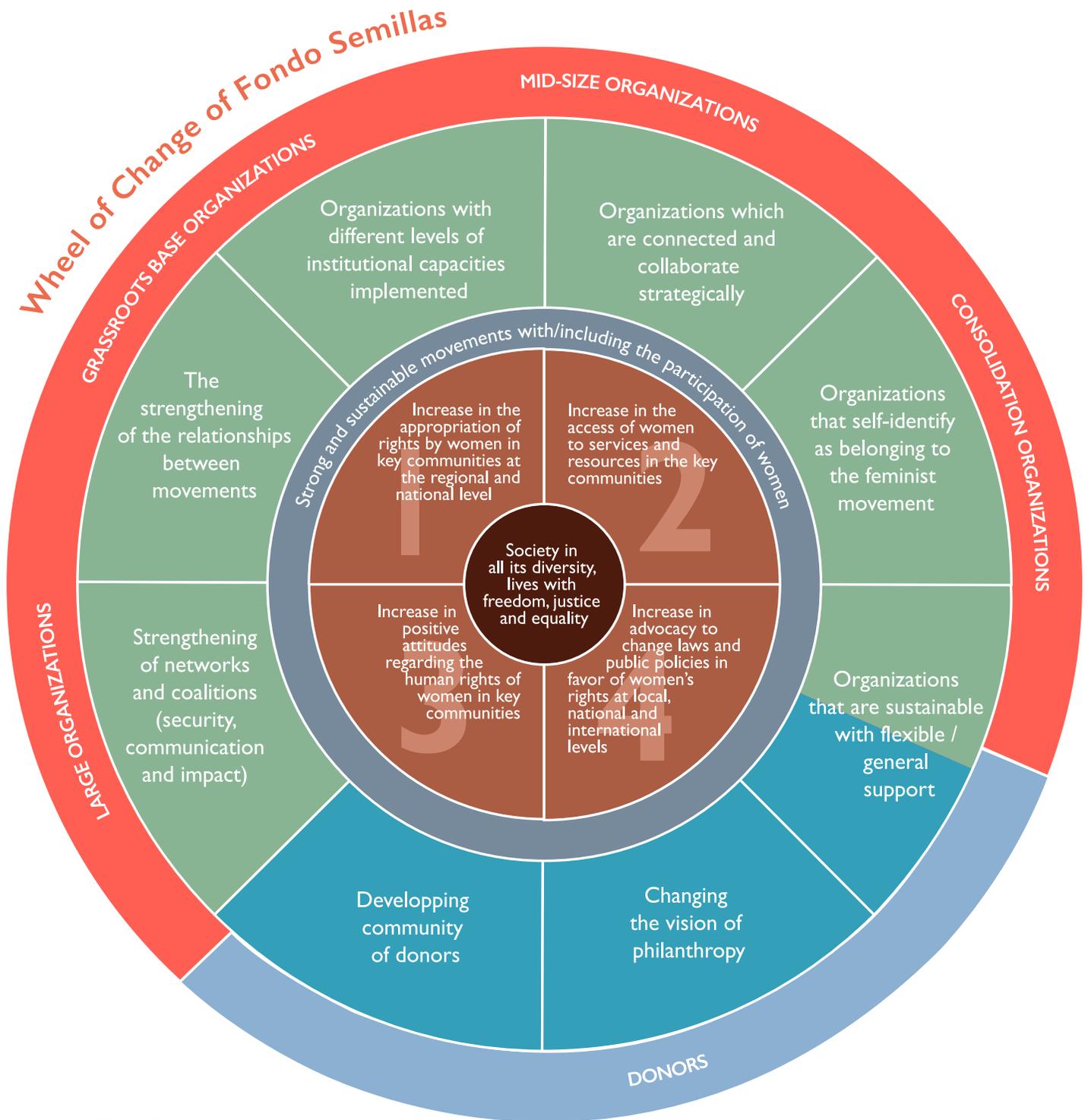
### Criteria to disregard

- **Number of members in core team:** it is not a reliable indicator (e.g. we talked to grassroots base and mid-size organizations with the same number of members in the permanent team, but the latter ones have an army of volunteers on rotation).
- **Geographical reach of the organization** ('alcance'): it is also a concept that gets fuzzy and unreliable to build our 'tier archetype': most organizations report (incl. the smaller-size ones) that even when their work is local, in reality they may have relationships across different states and do public policy lobbying at the state or national level, while continuing to provide service and accompaniment in their local area... What we are actually seeing is multiple levels of reach, with organizations pursuing different aims, at different levels all at the same time. Additionally, the rise of digital communications allows groups to deploy reach in new ways (e.g. organizations which are using digital strategies may have a national or international reach while still qualifying as a grassroots base grantee).

## 10.A new Theory of Change

Finally, the research input helped to revise the Theory of Change that was adopted in 2016, at the beginning of the Strategic Plan. The new Wheel of Change is premised on a dynamic model and it aims at capturing the interconnected relations between our own action and impact as a Fund as well as that of our grantee-partners. The Wheel is a tool that can be communicated to our community of stakeholders and is actionable by our team. This is supported by a menu of indicators which are now rooted in our Wheel of Change<sup>26</sup>, the result of a consultation with the team at Fondo Semillas, as well as with our grantee-partners and allies.

<sup>26</sup> The full menu of indicators is available in the full-length report



**Problem:**

Many women in Mexico cannot exercise their fundamental rights. This is rooted in gender inequality and the inferiority attributed to women in a patriarchal system, exacerbated by poverty and insecurity, that denies women their rights, their freedom of choice and participation, and prevents development towards a more egalitarian society.

## The Wheel of Change

We prioritize the diagram shape to capture the iterative and dynamic nature of change, as well as the interconnectedness of the different elements which drive change.

We also retain different levels within the wheel to emphasize the relationships between our grantee-partners' organizations, our intervention strategies (our own and our grantee-partners' ones), and the expected outcomes of our work:

- **Level 1 Planting the Problem:** this identifies the fundamental issue(s) that Fondo Semillas wants to address.
- **Level 2 Our Audiences:** starting from the outer circle, we introduce the core audiences of our work, **our grantee-partners, through the tiers system**. At this level, the wheel is divided in four parts (large, mid-size, consolidation, grassroots base), as well as our donors.
- **Level 3 Strategies:** moving into the second level (outer), we find **The Strategies** (also called Interventions) used to instigate and drive change. This level is divided according to two colours: this is to differentiate between intervention strategies that directly concern grantee organizations, and those which concern Fondo Semillas' donors.
- **Level 4 Outcomes:** moving into the third & fourth levels (inner), we find **The Outcomes**, divided in two levels, intermediary outcomes (e.g. sustainable and strong movements) and long-term outcomes (the four quadrants). Here, what it really is about is the impact of our grantees' work and our own for and with Mexican women.
- **Level 5 The Vision:** at the final level in the center lays Fondo Semillas' **Vision** for the change the Fund wishes to achieve "Society in all its diversity, lives with freedom, justice, and equality".



## Conclusion

**“I believe that yes, there has been an impact, there has been a change, a transformation in our communities. Although I still can’t wait for the time when our women legislators and representatives won’t have to deal with this condescension, you know. They do not see us as equal citizens, people with rights, whose rights they must respect. I want to leave this condescension behind, change it. We want them to recognize that we have rights in our work contracts, we want them to recognize that men also benefit from our presence in these spaces, as much as changing the dynamics at home. Dismissing us as women is still rooted in people’s mind... I was leading a workshop recently alongside some officials from the local government, and one man told me ‘if you complain so much you’re not going to get far’ and I told him ‘if you represent me at the national level, where are we going?’”**

***Grantee-partner, Labor rights, Center***

The road towards change is long and meandering, but the evidence is compelling: women human-rights defenders are incredibly resilient and resourceful when it comes to organizing, and they are reaching more and more women as well as their families in their communities, from the economic cooperatives of Chiapas to the offices of women domestic workers organizations in Mexico City, from the labor rights collectives in Tehuacán or San Cristóbal to the environmental defenders in the Baja Peninsula.

The findings from this research represent seven months of data collection and compilation, of immersion in the field, of discussions with all our stakeholders, of analysis and collaborative work sessions with the team at Fondo Semillas to present a thorough, analytical and strategic picture of the work and achievements of the Fund in the past two years. Beyond interrogating the past, it equips the Fund with a compass –strategic recommendations regarding the Fund’s processes and tools as well as a new ‘Wheel of Change’ to help us navigate the second half of our Strategic Plan.

There are challenges for the Fund to address in the future, but we are confident that Fondo Semillas has the tools, the strategic acumen and the partners (from donors to strategic advisors and allies) to push ahead and to keep improving and expanding its support to the many women's organizations that do incredible work for promoting and achieving gender equality in Mexico.



## Thanks

For organizations, it is always challenging to make a stop in the road, between the ongoing urgencies and time-constrained commitments, in order to review where we are and where we need to go. It is a challenge to look at what is important when everything seems urgent. And yet, what we always hear about good leadership, strategic organizations breaking ground, is that this can only be achieved by stepping out of the turbulence of the everyday urgencies to look at the bigger picture.

We could not have done this process without the trust we immediately felt with our evaluator, Eva Didier. Her critical voice, feminist perspective and intuition helped us understand how to tackle what seemed at the beginning like an overwhelming task: if it is already difficult to measure changes in one of our programs, with some of our grantees, how do we measure and evaluate something as big as our strategic plan?

Without a methodology already in place for evaluating strategic plans, it is not easy to learn how to do it. This is why Eva's participation in this process was essential not only in terms of creating the roadmap, but also in supporting our process in the middle of a very busy year for us and making sure that we were always on top of this process, learning and contributing with new ideas and our points of view.

Equally important are the contributions of our allies, particularly our grantee partners and donors who committed their time for in-depth interviews and focus groups. We cannot thank you enough for speaking truthfully about the opportunities and challenges that you see for Fondo Semillas. Some of the beneficiaries from our grantee partners also contributed their valuable time to reflect on what has changed for them with the work of the grantee partners. All of these opinions are pushing us towards a better place, a revised Theory of Change and strategic plan with which we now know with greater clarity where to take forward and how to get there. There is nothing like a different angle to see more clearly where your blind spots lie, but also what your biggest strengths are.

Thank you all for letting us see Fondo Semillas through your eyes. We are now in a different place because of you: we know where we need to go to improve and to continue supporting the movement for gender equality in Mexico.

**Laura García**  
**Executive Director**  
**Fondo Semillas**





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