ICAN Final Evaluation (2020-2022)

ICAN’s Added Value

Introduction

Merits Partnership has conducted the Final Evaluation of the International Civil Society Action Network for Women’s Rights, Peace and Security (ICAN) 2018-2022, and as part of the deliverables for that assignment, has prepared this brief summary of ICAN’s added value. The document draws upon data from the evaluation to show where ICAN is adding value to local women’s organisations working at the nexus of peace and security, to international organisations including funders, as well as to the wider WPS sector.

25 April 2023
Findings

Finding 1: ICAN’s role in leading the Women’s Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL) and in providing holistic institutional support is central to the alliance’s achievements, by virtue of strengthening the work of members including by facilitating the sharing of ideas, experiences and learning.

Data from the evaluation strongly showed that the WASL network provides an important locus for local women-led organisations active in peacebuilding and preventing and countering violent extremisms (P/CVE) to share ideas, advice and experiences that directly inform their approach to and implementation of programming. Of particular value is that the exchange is among trusted peers who understand and have direct experience of the challenges in implementation. Further, it allows for exchange of learning across countries and regions, and enriches the approaches adopted in different contexts.

Central to the success of WASL is ICAN’s role in originally launching and subsequently in leading the network, including having ICAN staff actively moderate member interactions and proactively ensure that it continues to operate in a smooth manner that maximizes benefits to members. This leadership role is characterised by its holistic nature, encompassing encouraging partners’ own vision for projects (discussed in finding 2), capacity building that strengthens partners’ work (discussed in finding 3), targeted financial support (discussed in finding 4), and emotional support and solidarity (discussed in finding 5). Absent this leadership role, it is unlikely that the WASL network would continue in its present form. In playing it, ICAN positively contributes to the results arising from WASL members’ work.

Finding 2: ICAN’s approach of “investing in trust”, which encourages its partners to articulate and implement their own strategies and vision, increases the strength and sustainability of the projects. This is the localization and decolonization agenda put into practice.

It is important to highlight that ICAN encourages its WASL partners to articulate their own perspectives and messages and to design projects in line with their own strategies and vision. The approach ensures that the projects are well adapted and rooted in local contexts, and so accorded more legitimacy within the communities. This increases the likelihood of the projects producing strong and sustainable results. It also contributes to empowering the WASL members so that they will have the confidence to continue to innovate going forward. This then is the localization and decolonization agenda being put into practice.

Finding 3: ICAN builds the technical and thematic capacities of WASL members, particularly those receiving funding through the ICAN Innovative Peace Fund (IPF); this strengthens the quality and sustainability of their work.

ICAN provides significant support to WASL members in terms of organizational and thematic capacity building. For example, IPF grantees may receive support in project design, proposal writing, monitoring and evaluation, reporting, grant management, as well as project implementation more generally.

This is complemented by the thematic capacity building that ICAN undertakes for WASL members and other institutions in the WPS space. The three main dimensions to this are the training, awareness raising, and tools developed under:

a) The Better Peace Initiative, which provides practical guidance and best practices on inclusive and gender responsive peace processes;

b) The She Builds Peace campaign, which promotes the safety, resourcing and inclusion of women peacebuilders including via its frameworks for action; and,

c) ICAN’s more general sharing of expertise, knowledge and literature on gender, peace and security.

The support contributes to improving the results, impact and sustainability of WASL members’ work.
Brief Summary of ICAN’s Added Value - ICAN Final Evaluation

Finding 4: The WASL member projects funded by ICAN’s IPF make clear contributions to peacebuilding and preventing violent extremisms at the local level, including by facilitating the funded organisations to win further, non-ICAN funding. This change underlines the importance of ICAN’s approach and vision, which links preventing violent extremisms with effective peacebuilding.

The evaluation’s portfolio review found good evidence that the projects funded by ICAN make contributions at various levels. In terms of outcomes (results) in particular, the project beneficiaries experienced:

- positive changes in their relationships and in community engagement, which can be linked to improved cooperation and social harmony;
- changes in awareness levels and knowledge related to peacebuilding and P/CVE;
- changes in skillsets as a result of capacity building;
- changes in access to resources in the sense of being more likely to win other funding from funders other than ICAN (for which there is good evidence in the evaluation data); and,
- changes in beliefs and attitudes, for example related to parent-child conflicts, women’s rights and political participation, psychosocial therapy, women’s roles in peacebuilding and preventing or countering violent extremism, and, interethic and intercultural cooperation.

These results collectively contribute to local-level change related to building more peaceful, resilient, equal, and pluralistic societies. Further, they have the possibility of contributing to larger and longer-term impact level changes, as they are transmitted more widely within the societies through key actors such as religious leaders. And the impact is extended as women-led organisations continue to participate in peacebuilding processes because of the space that the projects open up. This dynamic is also supported by the fact that WASL members can point to the results and their experience in planning and implementing their ICAN-funded projects to successfully apply for non-ICAN funding going forward. At a more fundamental level, the results underline the value of ICAN’s approach and conceptual vision, that effective prevention of violent extremism requires community-based peacebuilding, and that effective peacebuilding cannot occur – either locally or internationally – without taking steps to prevent extremisms that often fuel violence and gender-based violence in particular.

Finding 5: The emotional support and sense of solidarity provided by ICAN to WASL members both directly and also indirectly – by leading the WASL network – is critical given the insecure contexts within which they work and the challenging issues that they seek to address.

WASL members work in difficult, often insecure contexts. Further, the scale and complexity of the challenges that they are trying to address is immense. As a result, there are very high levels of demands on the members, which means the emotional support that they gain through the network, the sense of shared struggle, of sisterhood and of not being alone, is highly valued. This was particularly evident during the long periods of COVID isolation, when many members depended even more on the WASL calls and contacts. In addition to making possible this mutual support by virtue of leading the WASL network, ICAN itself also provides direct emotional support to members – visible in the frequent supportive messaging and calls exchanged between staff and WASL members – as well as more direct protection support such as security assessments when members are threatened. This support is highly valued by WASL members.

Finding 6: ICAN’s advocacy work contributes to changing the larger WPS and PVE ecosystems, by demonstrating the value of a gender responsive approach and particularly by bringing WASL partners into key spaces.

Data from the evaluation showed that ICAN is present in many key spaces where there are opportunities for conducting effective advocacy, for example with national governments and at the United Nations. ICAN is consistently strong in showing the importance of a feminist analysis, the value added of women’s contributions to conflict resolution and peacebuilding, the importance of utilising a gender lens to understand violent extremisms, as well as in making the case for stronger funding of the WPS agenda. An example of this is ICAN’s strong messaging about the critical role of civil society and gendered approaches in P/CVE and the participation of ICAN’s founder and CEO Sanam Naraghi Anderlini at the UN and Spanish government organised “High-Level International Conference on Human Rights, Civil Society and Counter-Terrorism” in May 2022, where these issues were raised by official actors. A further example relates to ICAN’s WPS
advocacy and recommendations on funding that fed into the General Assembly’s High Level Meeting on Financing for Peacebuilding in 2022. One key recommendation, to adopt indicators to assess the amount of funding that goes directly to women-led organizations rather than just looking at funding for gender equality, was taken up in an outcome summary document, and contributed to informing General Assembly Resolution A/RES/76/305 on Financing for Peacebuilding in September 2022. The resolution in turn has the possibility of affecting financing decisions going forward, and so contributing to impact-level changes.

Data also showed that ICAN is producing key knowledge products and collaborating with like minded organizations that can inform the emerging debates in the advocacy spaces where it is present.

A notable aspect of ICAN’s advocacy work is that it brings WASL members along to meetings and events, thus giving them a platform to undertake advocacy with these key actors and so allowing local women’s voices to be heard and amplifying their agendas. The WASL members’ messages have the possibility to strongly resonate with the key actors by virtue of their local knowledge and practitioner-related experience and legitimacy. Further, the evidence shows that this accompaniment enables WASL members to continue their own advocacy work, thus broadening the number of key actors pushing for change.

Finding 7: ICAN enables greater understanding of local contexts for key international actors and helps to inform international decision-making, including by bringing its local partners into international spaces.

The evaluation has found that key international actors such as funders, politicians within foreign ministries, as well as technocrats in multilateral organisations including the UN system particularly value the connection to the local that they gain via ICAN and its WASL members, and ICAN’s publications and awareness raising work. It allows them to better understand local situations, priorities and challenges in relation to the WPS agenda, understanding that is deepened by virtue of the global breadth, knowledge of issues and reach of ICAN including through its WASL members in multiple countries.

Such understanding is important given that it is often difficult to gain reliable information on local communities’ perspectives and priorities in fragile and conflict affected contexts. This is especially true regarding people whose points of view are traditionally accorded less space and legitimacy, such as women peacebuilders. The result is ICAN’s role as bridge and facilitator positively informs the international actors’ policy and funding decision-making, and contributes to strengthening their responses to conflict and violent extremism.

Finding 8: ICAN’s publications are valued as an important resource by key actors in the WPS space.

Multiple evaluation interviewees including funders, ICAN peer organisations and WASL members said that ICAN’s publications are of high quality, and that they draw upon them regularly in their work. Those publications were particularly valued for their analysis that draws together many individual voices into cogent, useable insights, while their manuals such as the “Better Peace Tool” are valued for being informed by the theories yet also being concrete, practical and useable including for training purposes. This in turn allows ICAN to contribute to building capacities within the larger WPS space.

Finding 9: ICAN is flexible and adaptable in its own work and the organisations it funds. This strengthens results as the responses are relevant to changing conditions and new opportunities.

There is strong evidence of ICAN flexibly adapting to changing conditions on the ground, both in terms of its own work as well as in its funding via the IPF. A good example is its response to the United States/NATO Afghan withdrawal in 2021 and the resulting security threats, particularly for Afghan women peacebuilders and their families. In this instance, ICAN staff took advantage of their local networks in collectively pivoting to support them. And during Covid when many project-related activities were impossible, ICAN’s flexibility enabled its partners to innovate and adjust their work priorities to be responsive to community needs and contribute to peacebuilding.

There is also good evidence of ICAN providing rapid response funding for its partners when peace process or other high level peace-related opportunities for participation have emerged. Its ability to do these things effectively is facilitated by its strong relationships and communication with partners, as well as the flexibility of the funding – i.e. not simply projectized funding – that ICAN had during the evaluation period. Overall, this flexibility and adaptability is a key strength of ICAN given that the contexts on which ICAN focuses are characterised by instability and changeability.
Finding 10: ICAN produces strong results with relatively few resources, but there is a cost to the team.

The evaluation has found that the activities and results produced by ICAN relative to the level of resourcing is high. This observation underlines the overall efficiency of their work, an observation that is also true of the projects funded by ICAN through the IPF. Yet this positive set of observations comes with a caveat: that the demands being put on staff of ICAN and its WASL partners are unsustainably high. This points to the need for a review of funding models going forward, including ensuring flexible funding to the extent that funders value the results gained through ICAN’s flexibility and adaptability.