



What makes the difference for equality?

**Voices from South
Africa, Paraguay and
Bangladesh on what
the EU can do**

CONCORD

European Confederation of NGOs working on
sustainable development and international cooperation

About CONCORD

CONCORD is the European Confederation of NGOs working on sustainable development and international cooperation. We are made up of 58 member organisations representing more than 2600 NGOs and are supported by millions of citizens across Europe.

We are the main interlocutor with the EU institutions on sustainable development policy and international cooperation. We are a member-led organisation which means that the members give the strategic direction of the Confederation.

More at: concordeurope.org

WHAT DO WE DO TO ACHIEVE TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE?



ENGAGE



INNOVATE



CHALLENGE



EVOLVE

26

NATIONAL PLATFORMS

25

NETWORKS

07

ASSOCIATE MEMBERS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Coordinator: Borja Arrue-Astrain (CONCORD)

With valuable contributions from: Salomé Guibreteau (CONCORD) and members of CONCORD's Inequalities and Sustainable Economy workstream

Research consultants: Dustin Kramer (South Africa and Bangladesh) and Paola Vaccotti (Paraguay)

Copy editor: Michael Wells

Design: www.profigrafik.sk - coordinated by Camilla Falsetti (CONCORD)

Publisher: CONCORD - Rue de l'Industrie, 10 - 1000 Brussels, Belgium

Year of publication: 2023

Cover: Photo of Women on Farms project (South Africa) by Ashraf Hendricks. Credits: CONCORD

This report was supported by the Robert Bosch Stiftung.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
SOUTH AFRICA	5
<i>Tackling persistent historical inequality</i>	
Using cell phones to improve lives in informal settlements	6
A movement of shelters tackling gender-based violence	7
Women-driven food security on farms	8
PARAGUAY	10
<i>Shining a light on structural inequalities</i>	
Sustained action for gender equality in a context of climate emergency	11
Supporting young people's income security in rural areas	13
Self-advocates leading the struggle for disability rights	14
BANGLADESH	16
<i>Closing the multiple gaps on the way to equality</i>	
Village courts strengthen justice in marginalised communities	17
Youth innovate to fight inequality in access to public services	18
Women-driven telemedicine and entrepreneurship	19
THE WAY FORWARD: SYSTEMIC CHANGE	21
From recognition to further action	21
A people-centred approach to tackling inequalities	23
Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development, a key condition	25

INTRODUCTION

Inequalities persist at high levels throughout the world. They affect individuals in a wide range of ways, including through unequal access to services and resources, to the right to a decent livelihood, the ability to participate in the political process or the enjoyment of opportunities on an equal footing with more privileged groups. Discrimination based on gender, age, race, ethnicity, migrant status, disability, sexual identity or orientation and geographical location is often at the root of inequalities which frequently compound each other.

Europe has a particular responsibility with respect to inequalities, given its position as the world's wealthiest economic block and as it comprises several former major colonial powers. Furthermore, Europe's political and economic relations with the rest of the world demonstrate ongoing neo-colonial approaches which perpetuate inequalities.

But there is good news. As inequalities are the result of human action and political decisions, citizens and politicians hold the power to reverse the harmful impacts of inequalities and build a world where everyone has the same rights and opportunities.

The increasing recognition of inequalities as a key global challenge by the European Union (EU) and many EU Member States shows that different partnerships, focused on equality, are possible and feasible. It is encouraging that some governments and policy-makers have made practical commitments and are funding programmes and projects that help to

reduce inequalities in partner countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia. **These concrete actions offer the hope that words can become transformative action if the necessary political will is brought to bear.**

In the following pages, we look at case studies in South Africa, Paraguay and Bangladesh which show how Europe can engage constructively with communities and marginalised groups and support their struggle for equality.

The present report identifies a number of key ingredients for equality, based on contributions from individuals and organisations directly involved in projects funded by the EU or EU Member States, as well as the views of our civil society partners, policy-makers and officials. We learned that, to be effective, all policies and programmes must start by recognising inequalities and adopting tools to tackle them. They need to include a multidimensional understanding of inequalities, a strong human rights focus, coherence across all policies with achieving equality and sustainable development, community engagement and ensuring long-term change.

By presenting interesting practices, challenges and potential for action, **this report aims to stimulate political debate among European policy-makers to fully mainstream inequality reduction in policies, programmes and projects.** If policy-makers adopt the key elements for successful inequality reduction outlined here, Europe's partnerships can become a true gateway to equality.

OUR METHODOLOGY

CONCORD members selected the focus countries by analysing inequalities across Africa, Latin America and Asia. The criteria applied included the levels of inequality in the country, the availability of equality-focused projects as well as whether the EU's or EU Member States' funding programmes included a focus on inequalities and the concern to preserve a regional balance.

Once the countries had been selected, desk research, meetings with CSO partners and officials allowed us to identify projects with a potential to reduce inequalities.

To find out more about the projects and to document their particular interest for inequality reduction, we relied on witness statements shared by people directly involved in the projects. We met them in person in South Africa and Paraguay, and online in the case of Bangladesh. This report is therefore not an endorsement of the projects included, nor a full assessment of their results and impacts, but an account of how those involved in the projects experienced them.

Our recommendations for the way forward are built on this input and our analysis of it, as well as on previous CONCORD work and the views of our local and international CSO partners.

SOUTH AFRICA

Tackling persistent historical inequality



Mondli from the Thembelihle Informal Settlement.
Photo by Ihsaan Haffejee. Credits: CONCORD

South Africa is one of the world's most unequal countries. Since the end of the apartheid era in 1994, income inequality and wealth concentration have remained stubbornly high. The country continues to have the highest Gini coefficient in the world, with race still a key marker of inequality, a legacy of the country's history.¹ The unemployment rate is consistently over 30%.²

South Africa is ranked at 109 out of 191 on the UNDP's Human Development Index and is one of Africa's biggest economies.³ However, as documented by a recent judicial commission of inquiry into what is termed the 'state capture' period⁴, state institutions and enterprises were captured for corrupt purposes under the former president and many of the country's gains started being reversed.

INEQUALITIES ACROSS PEOPLE'S LIVES

"When you come to South Africa, inequalities are in front of your eyes", said Joseph Eliabson Maniragena from African Monitor, a civil society organisation (CSO). *"South Africa and inequalities cannot be separated",* confirmed Vanessa Black, from Biowatch, another CSO based in the country.

Some figures prove them fully right. Currently, over 10 million people (about 17% of the total population) live in informal settlements, which are often located far away from socio-economic opportunities and lack access to decent basic services. The residents of these settlements bear the brunt of the consequences of inequality in urban South Africa.

¹ "Inequality Trends in South Africa: A Multidimensional Diagnostic of Inequality" Stats SA, SALDRU, AFD, (November, 2019), <https://www.afd.fr/en/ressources/inequality-trends-south-africa-multidimensional-diagnostic-inequality>.

² "Quarterly Labour Force Survey – Q2:2022" Statistics South Africa, (August, 2022), <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=15685>.

³ "Human Development Report, 2021-22," UNDP, September 2022, <https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-2021-22>.

⁴ "The Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture," 2022. Available: <https://www.statecapture.org.za>.

Similarly, gender-based violence is a particular scourge in the country, which ranks 97 out of 170 countries in the UNDP's Gender Inequality Index.⁵

Statistics South Africa reported in recent years that at least 1 in 5 partnered women in South Africa experienced violence from a partner, while the femicide rate is significantly higher than the global average.⁶

Outside of cities, farm workers produce food that is consumed in South Africa and abroad, but in their own lives, food security has historically been a major issue. Women farm workers in particular have been economically marginalised over generations, and this has worsened with increased seasonal and casual working arrangements.

Tackling deeply-rooted inequalities by empowering settlement residents, shelter users and supporting sustainable farms

Against a background of persisting inequalities, three projects funded by the EU and one EU Member State show how, through creative and sustained work, these inequalities are being addressed, even in a challenging social, political, and economic context: informal settlements creating new avenues to improve basic services, strengthening women's shelters and their dialogue with government, and transforming food security with sustainable farming driven by women farmworkers.

USING CELL PHONES TO IMPROVE LIVES IN INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

When the South African government instituted one of the most stringent COVID-related lockdowns in the world in March 2020, the language was *"wash your hands, make sure you keep your distance"* explains Shumani Luruli. But for people living in informal settlements who use communal water and toilets, this was not so simple.

Shumani is a programme coordinator from Planact, a Johannesburg-based civil society organisation working on issues of governance and social accountability.

'Let's protect one another'

In response to the lockdowns, the International Budget Partnership of South Africa, Planact and a number of organisations around the country started 'Asivikelane'⁷ ('Let's protect one another' in Zulu). The

project "started as a way of continuing monitoring what was happening on the ground, but also making sure that the voices of the communities are heard", says Shumani.

Local community facilitators motivating communities

Asivikelane trained local community facilitators across the municipalities to assist and recruit residents. This has been coupled with ongoing advocacy campaigns. The combination of local facilitators, strategic focus, and practical advocacy was central to growing the project and expanding the ability to collect this data. This would ultimately help it become a key channel between informal settlement residents and government to improve basic services.

Co-funded by the European Union, Asivikelane today reaches roughly 400 informal settlements across 10 municipalities. Every month, residents answer a series of questions via SMS, WhatsApp or telephone on the status of water, sanitation and waste collection services. Asivikelane collates the data into a traffic light system (with red, orange, and green showing the level of service). They then release it and share it with the government to facilitate practical and direct responses. As Shumani explains, "it's really bringing out the real issues. It's not from us, from our desktop research: it's real data".

A voice for informal settlement residents

When the City of Johannesburg tabled its draft budget for the year in 2022, Asivikelane assisted residents in six cities to understand the budgets and make submissions by training communities on three aspects: how to read budgets, defining budget priorities, and ways to engage with the budget process. In Johannesburg, residents in 53 areas made submissions on the budget and many engaged in public budget meetings. They made specific recommendations about the services that impact their lives directly, including increased allocations for water and toilets, as well as services such as waste collection and electricity.

In May 2022, Planact was invited to participate in a public engagement with the Mayor of Johannesburg. Mike Makwela, a senior programme coordinator from Planact attended to present the Asivikelane findings, as well as the budget recommendations that had come directly from residents.

⁵ Gender Inequality Index, GII dataset, UNDP, 2021, <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/thematic-composite-indices/gender-inequality-index#/indicies/GII>.

⁶ "Statistics SA: One in five SA women experience physical violence, young women hard-hit by HIV/Aids," Daily Maverick, (15 May 2017), <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2017-05-15-statistics-sa-one-in-five-sa-women-experience-physical-violence-young-women-hard-hit-by-hiv-aids/>.

⁷ Asivikelane: <https://asivikelane.org/>.

From a big win to a longer road ahead

When the budget was published, the allocation for toilets in informal settlements had increased by 53% from R35.4 million to R53.3 million. Though small adjustments in the budget have occurred before, it was unusual for a major increase to be made in response to civil society engagement like this.

Ultimately, there is still much to be done. As Shumani says, they need to see that this money is spent properly and that the other recommendations in their budget submission, such as ensuring that there is more transparency in resources for informal settlements, receive urgent attention.

Asivikelane has shown that by building a channel through which informal settlement residents can actively engage with government, the basic services essential for a decent quality of life and to tackle inequalities can be improved on an ongoing basis.

A MOVEMENT OF SHELTERS TACKLING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

During the 10 years Fisani Mahlangu spent working in shelters for women and their children in the Mpumalanga province of South Africa, she had first-hand experience of the challenge of isolation. Back then “shelters used to function randomly, each person doing their own thing in their own corner”.

Today Fisani is an Executive Member of the National Shelter Movement and coordinates one of its provincial members, the Mpumalanga Shelter Movement (MSM) in a relatively poor province, historically dominated by a few big industries such as coal mining.

Shelters provide support to survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) – from accommodation and meals, counselling and legal assistance to skills development for pathways to safety and where possible, increased incomes.

In 2016, the Movement partnered with the South African office of the Heinrich Böll Foundation on a project funded by the European Union, “Enhancing

State Responsiveness to Gender-Based Violence: Paying the true costs”. Through research, capacity-building and dialogue, the project aimed to improve state support and shelter services, while increasing the visibility of, and referrals to, shelters.

From research to a stronger movement

“All we eat is bread, bread, bread and bread” – these words, coming from a woman in one of the shelters during the research, stayed with Fisani. As most shelters are non-profit organisations, the research⁸ showed how government funding for shelters was both inadequate and inconsistent, rarely supporting the full costs of shelter services. Funding was often



Fisani with two collaborators at the Mpumalanga Shelter Movement. Photo by Ihsaan Haffjee. Credits: CONCORD

delayed, leaving shelters with bread, but little else. As Fisani explains, survivors of gender-based violence “are there, they need to bathe, they need warm water, they need lights on, their kids have to go to school”.

The project provided a range of support from building a powerful evidence base through research, training and capacity-building to strengthen the shelter movement and facilitating engagement with stakeholders, including in government.

They then started working to unify shelters in the region and engage with policy-makers, providing them with powerful evidence at a series of national roundtables and discussions they organised once the research was complete. Through the research outputs, the project provided evidence that the movement could use when engaging with the

⁸ <https://za.boell.org/en/GBV-care-support-in-a-time-of-epidemic>.



Madelein with two other women from the Women's on Farm project.
Photo by Ashraf Hendricks. Credits: CONCORD

government. This was key as the costs of sheltering had previously not been systematically known. Training and capacity-building such as on storytelling, movement building and speaking with the media were key elements.

The training was fully integrated into a sustained, meaningful process of research and advocacy. This made it targeted and therefore effective.

Fisani explains that during this period their *“work became strengthened across the province, not in terms of just the number of actions, but also the type of work that we do in those shelters. It got better”*.

Attracting the attention of those in power

In December 2019, South Africa’s Commission for Gender Equality, a constitutional body, held public investigative hearings on the state of shelters. Remarkably, it became clear that the National Shelter Movement had fully informed the Commission’s investigation and they were cited as the main contributor of research and information about the functioning of shelters. The Commission was therefore able to *“take the government to task about*

their role and what they were doing”, Fisani explains.

Today, Fisani’s desire is to see that *“the government commits themselves seriously in terms of fighting GBV”*. But *“it is also a commitment from local community members, because violence is something that happens in our comfortable spaces, in our own neighbour’s household, in our own households. We all need to play a part, and not look away, because it is only through taking active participation that we’re going to fight this.”*

WOMEN-DRIVEN FOOD SECURITY ON FARMS

“You’ve got to communicate with the soil. There’s a time of year when the soil speaks to you” explains Madelein Herwil walking through a food garden below the mountains between Paarl and Franschoek near Cape Town, *“and it worked out very nicely last year. We had a huge harvest of pumpkins, squash, carrots and spinach”*.

Madelein is an organiser from the Women on Farms Project⁹, based in the Western Cape province of South Africa, well-known as one of the country’s

⁹ Women on Farms project: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064137881308>.

major tourist destinations and home to the city of Cape Town. The province accounts for almost half of the country's agricultural exports according to the Western Cape Provincial Government.

It is here where women farm workers are building collective power to end the underlying social and political conditions that cause poverty and inequality, not only by producing their own food, but using agroecology to develop a more sustainable way of farming.

Building food security and incomes

Women farm workers have the least job security as *"men are the most employed persons on the farm. Women normally only get to do seasonal work, and when the season is over, there are no jobs for women"*, explains Madelein. This also means that with less income, there is less money to buy food.

With funding from the Cooperation Ministry of Germany and partnering with Oxfam South Africa, Women on Farms has worked, through its food garden project, with over 450 women farmworkers across the Western Cape to develop and sustain food gardens.

Sustainability for the long term

Madelein explains that *"it is not easy, especially for women, because everybody is just so used to men doing this stuff"*. Many women farmworkers also live in substandard housing and getting enough water to make the food gardens grow can be difficult.

But now *"they can have these beautiful food gardens"*, Madelein says, *"because if there is a food garden, there will always be food on the table"*. Ordinarily, *"they have to pay a lot of money to buy vegetables at the supermarket, but now they are saving money. By producing these food gardens, they are saving a lot."*

Ultimately the gardens are helping address social, economic and climate inequalities, particularly in terms of skills, access to food security, and working with those heavily impacted by climate change. They also point to the larger, underlying gender inequality faced around historical injustice. Today, Women on Farms is advocating for a broader social wage and for access to land. With their own land Madelein says, *"these women, really they can be farmers."*

Building on existing organisational networks

The project offered training in agroecology, an approach promoted by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization which focuses on holistic, sustainable, and contextual practices, as well as providing starter seeds and equipment. They managed to expand across the region and become effective because the organisation could leverage previously existing, strong organisational networks, while connecting the development of the food gardens with their advocacy and political work, rather than developing food gardens in isolation from the broader political and social context.

Karlien Martin, a retired farmworker who has lived on the farm for over 21 years, started her food garden here with Madelein's help. The COVID pandemic brought food insecurity to the fore in South Africa. But on this farm, Karlien depended on her food garden, not just for herself, but to share with the community around her. Indeed, Madelein speaks of the gardens' existence at the beginning of COVID as a *"huge, huge victory"* given how essential they were to feeding so many people.

PARAGUAY

Shining a light on structural inequalities



La Casa de la Mujer.
Photo by Pablo Ortiz. Credits: CONCORD

Paraguay has one of the highest levels of inequality in South America. The country has a total population of 7.45 million inhabitants (2022), of whom 121 000¹⁰ (1.62%) are indigenous people and are the most affected by all the different types of inequality.

Paraguay ranks 105 out of 191 countries on the UNDP's Human Development Index¹¹. Despite a reduction of income inequality between 2003 and 2020, significant inequalities persist. According to the World Inequality Database, 1% of the population holds almost 20% of national income, with the top 10% holding more than 50%.¹² Poverty, measured as the ability to afford a basic basket of goods and services to meet minimum nutritional and other needs, affected up to 26.9% of the population in 2021.

THE STRUGGLE TO PUT INEQUALITY ON THE AGENDA

The ongoing legacy of one of South America's longest dictatorships (1954-1989) is felt, both in terms of the persistently high levels of inequality and limited political interest and involvement. Civil society organisations have struggled to raise awareness of the issue and their calls on the government to tackle persistent inequalities have not been heard.

In recent years, the stability of the Paraguayan economy and continued growth have not been translated into a substantial reduction in economic inequalities. Young people in Paraguay have an unemployment rate above average, even higher in rural areas, so for many of them migration to urban centres is the only alternative.

¹⁰ INE (National Institute of Statistics), <https://www.ine.gov.py/default.php?publicacion=2>.

¹¹ "Human Development Report, 2021-22," UNDP, September 2022, <https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-2021-22>.

¹² "Paraguay," World Inequality Database, <https://wid.world/country/paraguay/>.

Paraguay ranks 111 out of 170 countries in the UNDP's Gender Inequality Index.¹³ The activism of conservative groups has hindered the efforts of human rights defenders to address gender inequalities as well as questions of sexual and reproductive rights.

Empowering women, youth and persons with disabilities

Europe has been playing a role to support the efforts of Paraguayan civil society organisations to tackle inequalities. They see the EU and its Member States as allies in raising awareness about the multiple dimensions of inequalities not or only partially addressed by national authorities.

The following stories illustrate the positive contribution Europe can make to improving the situation in Paraguay. They show how women can be empowered in a context of climate vulnerability and social exclusion and give examples of actions to improve the access of young people in rural areas to employment and a decent income; as well as action to foster the participatory design of policies for people with disabilities involving the leadership of self-advocates.

SUSTAINED ACTION FOR GENDER EQUALITY IN A CONTEXT OF CLIMATE EMERGENCY

"I thought it was just me, but I realised that among the women who were in the same organisation we hid the truth of what was happening to us". Jazmín, founder of the Women's House (Casa de las Mujeres), explains the isolation she experienced first-hand as a result of gender inequality.

Jazmín lives in the Bañado de Asunción¹⁴, an area of the capital city where the rural migrant population is concentrated and which takes its name from the Paraguay river, which "bathes" (baña, in Spanish) the area, flooding it frequently. This informal settlement near the city centre is the poorest area of Asunción. The impact of the *El Niño* phenomenon, causing floods and epidemics of dengue, Zika and

chikungunya has been particularly devastating in this area.

Addressing gender inequality by using detailed knowledge of the community

The combination of climatic, economic and social inequalities, especially in access to housing, make the Bañado a particularly risky area.

"The Bañado welcomes all kinds of people without distinction, people from the countryside, from indigenous communities, foreign migrants, the LGBTQI+ community, people with disabilities. A lot of people keep coming every year", Jazmín tells us.



In 2017 and 2018¹⁵ there were two major floods¹⁶, so humanitarian assistance was key to support the affected population. Two projects financed by the Basque Government (Spain)¹⁷ and channelled by Oxfam Intermón focused on the transformative leadership of women in emergency contexts, and specifically in the Bañado.

The project focused on the transitory migration and temporary relocation of the inhabitants of the Bañado communities. Based on the identification of priorities by the community, it was clear that violence against women increased in moments of crisis such as floods, so the project implemented strategies for the prevention of this violence, the empowerment of women and the generation of sustainable livelihoods.

¹³ Gender Inequality Index, GII dataset, UNDP, 2021, <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/thematic-composite-indices/gender-inequality-index#/indicies/GII>.

¹⁴ https://www.conacyt.gov.py/sites/default/files/upload_editores/u454/Libro_urbanizacion_asuncion.pdf.

¹⁵ <https://www.ultimahora.com/mas-21000-desplazados-inundaciones-asuncion-n1130570.html>.

¹⁶ https://dgvs.mspbs.gov.py/webdgvs/files/boletines_inundaciones/SE43_2018_Boletin_Inundaciones.pdf.

¹⁷ <https://euskalankidetza.hegoa.ehu.eus/es/projects/4380>, <https://euskalankidetza.hegoa.ehu.eus/es/projects/2841>.

An emergency-related project generating long-lasting outcomes: When the focus on inequalities enables sustainable impacts.

The initial purpose of the project was to attend to the humanitarian emergency related to the floods, but it managed to generate results that still last today.

With a view to achieving a sustainable impact, the project sought to address the structural factors of inequality in the Bañado, with a focus on gender inequality.

In order to assess the specific needs and realities of the women in the community, the project carried out a diagnosis of the situation and a self-administered survey of the women. Based on this precise knowledge, the project focused on promoting female leadership through economic empowerment.

In addition, in order to reach particularly marginalised women, the project adopted an intersectional approach by focusing on young, indigenous women and addressing potential situations of gender-based violence.

The Women's House (Casa de las Mujeres) is a sustainable outcome, made possible thanks to the focus of the project on inequalities and the precise knowledge of the realities and needs of the community.

Financial autonomy and safe spaces

Jazmín is an active participant in grassroots women's organisations in the area. When she realised that the initial project diagnosis showed that many adult and adolescent women suffered or had suffered gender-based violence as she had, she decided to get involved in order to contribute to actions that could be sustained over time.

Jazmín and the other Bañado women who made up the initial Women's Circle group received training to start a business and support to sell their products. They decided to make bedding and this activity was the nucleus around which the women could meet and share their concerns. That group, initially six women, has expanded to 45 and is still working today. From the beginning of the project, the group realised that combining entrepreneurship and the opportunities to share experience in the Women's Circle have contributed to their emotional and financial empowerment to break away from the gender-based violence that many of them experience.

A Women's House to durably transform the community

The Women's Circle was not, however, only a place to meet and talk. As a consequence of the visibility and awareness of gender-based violence and the support made available by the project, it also became a safe place for both adult and adolescent women victims of violence. A physical safe space, called the Women's House where temporary shelter and support is given to women victims of violence, was

set up by the core group of women who initially worked on the project and is one of its tangible and lasting legacies.

Jazmín explains that *"when we hear about a woman who is experiencing violence, we do not intervene abruptly but we invite her for coffee or lunch and while chatting we let her know about her rights"*. Based on this awareness, women break with the normalisation of the violence they suffer and receive support to get out of the vicious circle.

Since the Women's House became a shelter for women experiencing violence, they have identified other groups that also suffer from it, essentially LGBTQI+ adolescents and young people who are rejected by their families and who are even more invisible. *"Following on from our work, we saw the need to train ourselves to understand the realities of LGBTQI+ people in the community. We trained ourselves to support them. We are working to create a non-violent space for them here, too"*.

Jazmín considers it essential to train women leaders in the area to ensure the continuity of the space. *"I would like the Women's House to grow, that this fight that seeks to improve the living situation of women and LGBTQI+ boys and girls does not end."*

SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE'S INCOME SECURITY IN RURAL AREAS

Fátima is proud of what she has achieved with her small business: *"Some people made fun of me because they didn't believe my business would work. Now they want to copy me"*.

Fátima is a young mother who lives in Caaguazú, a rural area 180 kilometres from the country's capital. Through a mobile messaging application, she received an advertisement from the local office of Plan International. The organisation offered a series of soft skills training courses and the opportunity of entering a contest to win a seed fund to start or strengthen a business. She decided to enter and won the contest, which included support for the development of her egg production business, as well as support for marketing her products.

The Sape'a Project¹⁸ is implemented by Plan International in association with the Ministry of Labour of Paraguay and with funding from the Spanish Agency for Development Cooperation (AECID). It started in 2014 and its second phase was still in force at the end of 2022.

Sape'a has reached people that the public employment policies of the Paraguayan Government have not been able to, providing them with soft skills, technical and entrepreneurship training. The project placed special emphasis on women because of the multiple forms of discrimination they experience, and especially those who have abandoned their studies. It also focused on the indigenous people of Caaguazú¹⁹.

Benefiting communities as a whole

Sape'a has set itself the goal of benefiting not only the participants, but also the communities in which they live.

The support provided to young people through Sape'a reportedly contributes to the dynamism of communities and generates new opportunities that break the economic inequalities in prosperity between rural and urban areas. By supporting young people committed to tackling climate and environmental challenges, the project also contributes to developing sustainable agricultural solutions that can improve food security.

"I was able to choose between help to find a job or starting a business. I chose to start a business because I want to be my own boss and to be able to keep my daughter with me," says Fátima, who felt the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused her to lose her previous job.



Fátima was able, with the support of the project, to train in soft skills, entrepreneurship and business planning. In addition, with the seed capital she received, she was able to buy 50 more hens for egg production to sell in the area, both to her neighbours and local stores. She wants to expand production to sell not only eggs, but also chickens, ducks and geese. *"My income has increased and I now contribute alongside my husband to the household expenses. I have been achieving my goals and I want to reach new ones"*.

When a young farmer wants to contribute to the 2030 Agenda

Fabián lives with his family, who owns a plot of land in the countryside. He is 26, an agronomist and is finishing a master's degree in animal production, without ceasing to be *"proudly a peasant and son of peasants"*.

Together with his parents, he planted tomatoes on a small scale, to provide for themselves and to sell to neighbours. By participating in the courses

¹⁸ In the Guaraní language "Sape'a" means "open your eyes". The projects are "Right to education and decent work for adolescents and young people in rural areas of Paraguay" SAPE'A (AECID Agreement 14-CO1-511) and "SAPE'A 2.0: Improving access to vocational training and employment dignified through an inclusive and differential approach" (AECID Agreement 18-CO1-1190).

¹⁹ "Social determinants for access to employment for young women in Paraguay", <https://plan-international.org/paraguay/publicaciones/determinantes-sociales-para-el-acceso-a-empleo-de-las-mujeres-jovenes-en-paraguay/>. "Job opportunities for young people in vulnerable situations", <https://plan-international.org/paraguay/publicaciones/oportunidades-laborales-para-personas-jovenes-en-situacion-de-vulnerabilidad/>.

offered by Sape'a, he deepened his horticulture and management skills, and with the seed capital he was able to build two greenhouses to expand his production of tomatoes, strawberries and other fruit and vegetables.

One of the success factors of his business and that of other young people in the project has been the continued support and follow-up offered by Plan International staff to each participant. *"They don't give you something and then just leave you to your fate, but they accompany and guide you. The accompaniment was vital in this process"*.

Fabián is interested in agroecology, which is why he uses natural means to control pests and is going to receive support from another project managed by Plan International to produce clean and sustainable energy. He was able to fulfil his dream of staying to work in his place of origin, without having to migrate to survive.

"Thanks to what I was able to obtain through the projects, I am getting more training, studying more. I would like to contribute to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in my community", he concluded.

SELF-ADVOCATES LEADING THE STRUGGLE FOR DISABILITY RIGHTS

Mario was born with a disability that progressed over time and completely limited his mobility, which meant he needs support to perform daily tasks. *"Children with disabilities used to be abandoned by their parents. This reality was not recognised, and therefore there were no specific public policies. It is a story common to almost all of South America."*

Mario is a communicator and teacher, as well as an activist for the rights of people with disabilities. He was a member of CONADIS, the National Commission on Disability of Paraguay.

"There are very narrow ideas of what inclusion means: 'we deliver a wheelchair and that is already inclusion'. Yet, inclusion is the

possibility of each person to be able to function, to fulfil themselves in their lives as they wish. Regardless of my physical condition, I have the right to live my life", said Mario.

Paraguay ratified the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2008. However, there was still a long way to go before this commitment was translated into concrete changes: *"Progress was slow and the possibility of improving public policies for people with disabilities was far away"*.

A call to action for the equality of people with disabilities

Through CONADIS, Mario got involved in the implementation of the Bridging the Gap project²⁰. Funded by the European Union and several Member States, it had two phases and carried out activities aimed at increasing the inclusion of people with disabilities in different countries of the Global South, including Paraguay.

In its first phase, the project validated several tools for the implementation of the CRPD in Paraguay: human rights indicators, guidelines for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in line with the Convention, guidelines on data sources to populate indicators and learning materials for the use of these instruments.

In its second phase, Bridging the Gap strengthened the capacity of SENADIS, the National Secretariat for the Human Rights of Persons with Disabilities and



*Mario from Bridging the Gap.
Photo by Juan Carlos Lucas. Credits: CONCORD*

²⁰ The project was implemented by several organisations in several countries. In addition to AECID, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), these included the International and Ibero-American Foundation for Public Administration and Policies (FILAPP) of Spain, the Austrian Development Agency (ADA), the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (IADC), the European Disability Forum (EDF) and the International Disability and Development Consortium (IDDC) and the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. bridgingthegap-project.eu

CONADIS, made up of representatives of persons with disabilities, by providing them with new tools for the implementation and monitoring of the National Plan for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2015-2030²¹.

“When Bridging the Gap appeared I was very curious, as other initiatives were born of good intentions, but with the often-mistaken assumption that they were doing the right thing. The Bridging the Gap proposal was an open invitation for people with disabilities to make their realities known to the State and to society”.

A long-lasting strengthening of government capacity

Through participatory processes, the project developed indicators for the implementation of the National Plan, which today incorporates inter-institutional indicators that oblige the various bodies of the government to comply with them as a prerequisite for the disbursement of their regular funds from the national budget. In addition, it provided guidelines for simplifying data registration procedures for people with disabilities, focused on improving the accessibility of government websites and prepared a study to improve the collection of data on disability in the 2022 census. Bridging the Gap also produced tools for inclusive education in the country’s education system.

Nowadays, and despite the significant challenges ahead, considerable progress has been made since the ratification of the CRPD in 2008. *“Today each public institution has to report what was done, how it was done. Bridging the Gap was a response to make development cooperation accessible and inclusive for people with disabilities, one that can have a significant impact on improving social inclusion and promoting our rights”,* said Mario.

Involving self-advocates from the outset was the key to success

When the second phase of Bridging the Gap was announced, Mario established a direct dialogue with the AECID. Mario’s ambition was for people with disabilities to be true co-creators of it. So that, contrary to other initiatives, Bridging the Gap included them from the very beginning and put them and their realities at the centre.

His efforts paid off. Thanks to the activism of organisations of people with disabilities, AECID accepted to shape the project together with people with disabilities themselves: *“We all sat around the table and worked to make the project inclusive. This is how we managed to lay the foundations for a transversal and comprehensive public policy”.*

²¹ <https://acnudh.org/load/2019/07/047-Plan-de-Acci%C3%B3n-Nacional-DPCD.pdf>

BANGLADESH

Closing the multiple gaps on the way to equality



Meeting with WBC Entrepreneurs.
Photo credit: United Purpose

With a population now of over 160 million people, Bangladesh has seen major changes over the past 20 years; a growing economy, rising incomes and a significant reduction in poverty.²² Ranking 129 out of 191 countries in the UNDP's Human Development Index, these changes, however, have also been accompanied by growing inequalities²³. The World Inequality Database shows that 1% of the population holds over 16% of national income, with the top 10% holding more than 40%.²⁴

THE MANY FACES OF INEQUALITY

The UNDP's gender equality index shows that Bangladesh has made significant advances in closing the gender gap, but there is still a long way to go.

In 2020, it ranked 133 out of 162 countries in the index.²⁵ Unequal access to healthcare and nutrition have a particularly strong impact on women and persons with disabilities. Working conditions, low and unequal wages, and safety have been challenges in the main industries, such as in garment production, that have driven the economy and where women form the majority of the workforce. The lack of economic independence is a major concern for persons with disabilities, whose job insecurity was aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic²⁶.

Roughly 20% of Bangladesh's population still live below the national poverty line according to the Asian Development Bank.²⁷ Given its geography and socio-economic conditions, Bangladesh is very

²² "Bangladesh Overview," *The World Bank: Data*, <https://data.worldbank.org/country/bangladesh>

²³ "Human Development Report, 2021-22," *UNDP*, September 2022, <https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-2021-22>.

²⁴ "Bangladesh," *World Inequality Database*, <https://wid.world/country/bangladesh/>.

²⁵ *Gender Inequality Index, GII dataset, UNDP, 2021*, <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/thematic-composite-indices/gender-inequality-index#/indicies/GII>.

²⁶ https://www.edf-feph.org/content/uploads/2020/11/i2i-disability_and_covid-19-influencer_pack-accessible.pdf.

²⁷ *Asian Development Bank, Basic Statistics 2022, Asian Development Bank (April 2022)*, <https://www.adb.org/countries/bangladesh/poverty>.

sensitive to climate change which is already having an impact on many different groups of people across the country, including those living in remote areas and indigenous communities who already face significant marginalisation.

Similarly, these communities have often struggled to access justice given the complexity of legal procedures, distance, expense and delays in resolving disputes. There is a significant digital divide that compounds many of these other inequalities.

Tackling unequal access to basic services

There are significant opportunities to close the gaps and many stakeholders are committed to reducing inequalities, so much more can be done.

Europe has a role to play in reducing inequality in Bangladesh. The EU has been a partner for 50 years. *“The EU and its Member States have had positive impacts on inequalities in Bangladesh, and that is relevant and important”*, says Ahmed Swapan Mahmud, from VOICE, a Dhaka rights-based advocacy organisation.

The three stories that follow show how innovative projects funded by the EU and two EU Member States are helping to reduce inequality across a diverse range of issues: access to justice and dispute resolution for marginalised communities, strengthening and supporting young people to advocate for change and create jobs, and breaking the digital and health divide through community and women-driven telemedicine.

VILLAGE COURTS STRENGTHEN JUSTICE IN MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES

In early 2021, after Kamona Rani tried to prevent her neighbours from trespassing onto her land, her neighbours assaulted her and destroyed her crops.

Kamona is a widow and lives with her three children in Naogaon, a district in northern Bangladesh. Like Kamona, most people who live here are farmers and many subsist below the poverty line, although they play an important role in the agricultural economy of this primarily rural region.

The unequal road to justice

Case backlogs at district level courts were always extremely high. To address this challenge, the government of Bangladesh enacted the Village Court Act in 2006, establishing a system of local courts. The courts were intended to provide an alternative to district courts, mainly dealing with smaller civil and criminal dispute resolution services in rural areas.

Yet, when Kamona reported her case, she had to travel to the police station 17 km away. The police sent the case to the District Judge Court located 27 km away. Six months later there was still no concrete outcome.

Kamona explains how she *“visited local leaders for solution of the dispute but received no result from them. My son-in-law and I went to the police station and district court five times to follow-up on the case.”*



Village court in Naogaon.
Photo credit: Activating Village Courts in Bangladesh programme

Kamona had to spend BDT 28 000 (EUR 278) for travel and other costs and repeatedly lost daily wages. As she explains, *“I was passing days with mental suffering. My family was always worried that the opponents could harm us.”*

Making a local justice system work

The Activating Village Courts in Bangladesh programme²⁸, co-funded by the European Union and the UNDP, sought to strengthen the village courts system.

²⁸ <https://www.villagecourts.org/>. You may also consult information about the programme on the website of the EU’s Delegation in Bangladesh.

The first pilot phase of the project ran from 2009-2015 to test the project concept. The second phase implemented the programme in 27 districts nationally and ended in 2020. In these 27 districts, the Activating Village Courts programme has been active in over 1000 Union Parishads, the most local unit of rural government.

Partnering with the government of Bangladesh, and with capacity-building support from civil society organisations in various regions, particularly legal services NGOs who assisted in the initial stages of setting up courts in those regions, Activating Village Courts provided financial, technical, and capacity support in thousands of localities across Bangladesh.

Winning compensation

During the second phase of the project, issues brought to the Village Courts were wide-ranging, such as land, income, altercations, theft and financial disputes. As the project moves into its third phase, the Village Courts now reach roughly 21 million people and are helping to reduce social and political inequality by providing access to justice, particularly for rural communities.

In early 2022, the district court referred Kamona's case to the Vimpur Union Parishad to resolve it through the Village Court. A hearing was held and as Kamona explained, *"no lawyer was required; rather I myself gave my statement before the Village Court. I had to spend a huge amount of time and money while my case continued in the district court whereas I had to pay nothing for the village court"*.

The Village Court found in her favour and awarded her compensation for the destruction of her crops and medical expenses. For Kamona, this was a major victory – she got *"fair justice within a short period"*.

Wide outreach through local awareness, capacity building and resources

The project achieved wide outreach through the combination of adequate resourcing and capacity building for officials in the Union Parishads, to ensure the courts were able to function.

Another key element of the village courts' success is their local nature, as communities both know about them and have easy access when needed.

To strengthen local access, the project developed local community knowledge of the courts and their roles. The project used an outreach approach, connecting with broader sets of local NGOs through public awareness campaigns. In so doing, marginalised communities were more easily able to find out about and then access these low-cost, small courts.

YOUTH INNOVATE TO FIGHT INEQUALITY IN ACCESS TO PUBLIC SERVICES

At one of the Agnibina Youth Group's monthly meetings, they decided that their community needed an ambulance and came up with a plan with a rather unexpected and locally-created solution: a battery-powered 'easy bike'.



Agnibina Youth Group's meeting.
Photo credit: Action Aid Bangladesh

The group comes from Shat Gambuj in the Bagerhat District of Bangladesh, explains Marzana Khatun, a group member who lives in the remote village of Saira, Bagerhat, where the small community struggles year on year with the direct consequences of climate change. Flooding regularly leaves them *"almost submerged in water"*, destroying homes and roads and leaving communities with *"no water to drink or cook with"*, as Marzana says. There are *"no facilities, no bathroom, not even an ambulance"*, making it difficult to transfer patients, especially pregnant women, to hospitals.

Organising and supporting young people

The Agnibina Youth Group is part of a youth hub of the broader district of Bagerhat, a district in the south-west of the country where climate change is already having significant impacts. In this context, young people in Bagerhat, like in many other regions of Bangladesh, do not have access to adequate support systems and their voices are marginalised in the decisions that affect their lives and those of their communities.

Action Aid Bangladesh works with young people by developing youth hubs and youth groups within them. Supported by funding from the Danish International Development Agency and Action Aid Denmark, Action Aid Bangladesh has worked with young people on its Action for Impact (A4I) project and the Global

Platform Bangladesh. The A4I project fosters active youth engagement in policy-making and economic development, while its Global Platforms provides the vehicle to support and organise movements and individuals promoting socio-economic and political change.

A bicycle transforms a local public service

Initially formed by a group of five people, the Agnibina Youth Group now involves 45 young people advocating for rights in their community.

Sousan Suha is an outreach officer with Action Aid Bangladesh who works closely with the youth hubs. Sousan explains that the hubs help “facilitate collective action” and deal with a range of issues such as gender-based violence, climate resilience and entrepreneurship. By 2022 they had developed seven youth hubs in Bangladesh, one of them located in Bagerhat.

The Agnibina Youth Group was supported by the project to defend their rights, develop skills and common initiatives, giving them both collective power and momentum, reducing political, social and income inequality.

After the Agnibina Youth Group decided the community needed an ambulance, they initiated consultation meetings and discussions with the authorities. Although the Chair of the local Union Parishad was open to the idea of an ambulance, financial constraints meant a long wait and no improvement to the situation.

The group came up with the idea to transform a battery-powered electric bike into an ambulance. The Chair agreed and the ambulance service was launched in November 2020, providing hospital transport to a community that never had this before.

While this was a big win for the youth group, there is still much to be done. Amongst other things, they are now working on a new campaign on Sexual Reproductive

Health and Rights, facilitating the distribution of sanitary pads to women in the community. For Marzana, who wants to help people this means “working with the group to go door-to-door”.

WOMEN-DRIVEN TELEMEDICINE AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Bondana Roy dreamed of opening a Women Business Centre after being involved in similar centres in nearby villages. In 2019 this became a reality, when she and four other women started their own centre.

Bondana lives in Gangarampur, Khulna District, in south-west Bangladesh. In 2021, the Gangarampur Women’s Business Centre became involved with a project initiated by the Bangladesh office of British charity United Purpose. The project, “Mobilising Rural Women Entrepreneurs for COVID-19 Response and Recovery in Bangladesh”, enabled Bondana to start offering a unique telemedicine service through a smartphone-based digital application called Click Health.

The project was implemented by the German Cooperation Agency (GIZ) and funded by the European Union and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). The year before the COVID pandemic, as United Purpose Senior Adviser, Subhagya Mangal Chakma explains, the organisation initiated a pilot phase to test a new model for telemedicine with 58 of the grassroots enterprise hubs called Women Business Centres (WBC) they had previously established in four districts. Through social enterprise and entrepreneurship United Purpose’s WBC model aims at contributing to safe and nutritious foods, healthy lives and a sustainable planet.

Developing an open-source application

United Purpose and local tech company, mPower, developed several applications as part of the project. One of these was the Click Health platform. A patient

Putting youth priorities and agency at the centre

The project was successful and able to grow thanks to its focus on youth-driven social change. It focused on issues that matter to young people (public services, skills and decent work).

Moreover, the intervention was successful in building bridges across civil society, government and the private sector through a multi-stakeholder approach

Crucially, the project included training on a range of issues, such as human rights-based approaches to social change, and consequently provided an organizing vehicle through which young people themselves can work together and raise their voices.

visits a WBC entrepreneur who connects them with a remote doctor for consultation through the platform. The doctor provides instructions and a prescription can be printed by a thermal printer at the WBC.

During the course of 2020 and 2021, they worked with WBCs across the country to roll it out in areas such as in Gangarampur as well as others like Chittagong Hill Tracts in the south-east, home to a large indigenous population and where a 1997 peace accord ended a two-decade long civil war. Sustained engagement and presence, alongside substantial customisation of the project the local situation was essential.

During this period, Bondana received skills development training on Click Health as well as instruction in preventative measures and safe vital sign testing. The centre then received computer and medical equipment.

In Gangarampur, as Bondana explains, the closest hospital is over 12 km away and can be expensive. Her community could now come to the nearby WBC for consultations and tests, which were also a lot cheaper. Bondana now coordinates with the Union Community Clinic and sub-district hospital and refers patients there where necessary.



entrepreneur may only speak an indigenous language that the doctor does not speak, prescribed medicine may not be available in a local pharmacy, and internet connectivity may be low in particularly remote areas.

These all required solutions outside of the application – doctors who could speak the indigenous language, assisting local medicine providers and getting mobile routers to boost internet connectivity.

Tens of thousands of patients have now undergone consultations and registered for health and nutrition services. Not only has this provided healthcare and economic activity, but is also contributing to reducing malnutrition through testing. And as Bondana explains, it is of particular help to female patients, who are more comfortable speaking openly with women, as opposed to interacting with mainly male doctors which had mainly been the case beforehand.

Setting a strong foundation and building incrementally was important. Ultimately, the project reduced the digital divide and social and economic inequality by enabling women to become entrepreneurs through a digital platform to provide healthcare services to underserved communities. Fifty-eight WBCs served over 26 831 patients through the Click Health Teleconsultation service from 21 October 2020 to 30 September 2022. 116 trained women entrepreneurs are providing telemedicine health services through Click Health and the complementary app Coronay Koronio, developed to identify COVID-19 symptoms.

Going forward, the plan is to integrate Click Health with several of the other applications. This is shifting access through a women-driven service to healthcare services and economic opportunities for people at risk of exclusion and discrimination across the country.

Connecting to the existing ecosystem: a key success factor

The project **positioned community partners as drivers**, listening to their visions and integrating it into the growing network of business centres.

The project **engaged with the full local context**. The application is central to the solution, but technologies do not exist in a vacuum. Dealing with the broader context and overcoming challenges outside of the technology makes all the difference in making technology successful. Building the project **on pre-existing networks of women entrepreneurs and Women Business Centres was key**.

Thinking locally and holistically to create a community-driven service

Looking at the whole system and adjusting to the local context was important in rolling out the platform in areas like Chittagong Hill Tracts. For example, an

THE WAY FORWARD: SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Our journey through South Africa, Paraguay and Bangladesh highlights the tangible effects of inequalities on people's lives.

The projects included in this report show how the European Union and EU Member States can contribute to tackling inequalities. However, they need to do more to ensure that all projects, actions and policies enable a structural change in political and economic systems, which can lead to lasting systemic change.

FROM RECOGNITION TO FURTHER ACTION

Our civil society partners in South Africa, Paraguay and Bangladesh highlighted the importance of their work to reduce inequalities, which is a priority for them. "When you come to South Africa, inequalities are in front of your eyes", Joseph Eliabson Maniragena from African Monitor, a civil society organisation, told CONCORD. "South Africa and inequalities cannot be separated", confirmed Vanessa Black, from Biowatch, another CSO based in the country.

Some of our partners told us that **operationalising the reduction of inequalities in programmes can be challenging, but that it is a very useful concept for advocacy**, as it can make it more efficient and comprehensive. This is key to ensure policy dialogue leaves no one behind. "The wide scope of the concept of 'inequalities' makes it possible to engage with many people confronted with many different challenges", Ahmed Swapan Mahmud, from VOICE, a Bangladeshi CSO, told CONCORD.

Officials from the EU and EU Member States that CONCORD met in South Africa, Paraguay and Bangladesh confirmed this analysis and agreed that reducing inequalities is one of their key challenges. Nonetheless, more needs to be done to ensure that this acknowledgement of the problem translates into practical commitments.

Inequalities recognised...

The EU and EU Member State officials we met consider that tackling inequalities is not only an **ethical and human rights obligation**, but also **the correct approach** to facilitate meaningful conversations with key players and thereby generate sustainable change.

Matteo Sirtori, Head of Cooperation at the European Union Delegation in Paraguay, told CONCORD that "inequalities in Paraguay are very evident, because they **remain high even though economic growth has been strong**", explaining why the EU has made inequalities a priority in the country. Paraguay is set to see a Team Europe Initiative focused on inequalities, although details were not available at the time of drafting this report. Fernando Rey, Head of Spanish cooperation in Paraguay until 2022, agreed that reducing the inequality gap in access to basic rights is crucial and, indeed, a responsibility for the international community in line with the **2030 Agenda commitments**.

Asked about the process that led the EU's Delegation to South Africa to focus on inequalities, Project Manager Aurélie Voix explained to CONCORD that this issue was central to the demands made by civil society organisations themselves. "It is a concept that resonates strongly with our South African partners. There is no way around inequalities in this country: they are in everyone's mouth; you need to address them. It is a concept that activates partners".

In some cases, European donors have purposely generated **dialogue on inequalities with government and civil society**. Mr Sirtori explained that this focus on inequalities provides a **new, more comprehensive outlook on the different policy sectors** and their role in ensuring systemic change: "By adopting the prism of inequality, investment in education, for example, is not made just for the sake of improving it, but also becomes key to building a more equal society. It is important to talk about inequalities, to put them in the title of the programmes, because that forces people to talk about them", he said.



... but insufficiently targeted

One European donor in Bangladesh highlighted the importance of making the reduction of inequalities a key priority which should be mainstreamed into the donor country's international cooperation framework and thus provide direction for project design and implementation. However, they acknowledged the **need for practical guidance and tools to effectively incorporate inequality reduction into programme objectives**. CONCORD found little evidence that guidance and tools for this purpose were available or used in the countries we studied.

As an illustration of this gap, another European donor acknowledged that **the extent to which project proposals address inequalities is not a criterion** for making funding decisions. Across the projects CONCORD analysed in South Africa, Paraguay and Bangladesh, it became clear that **inequalities were more often encountered along the way rather than being a key, explicit priority at the beginning of a project**. The concept of inequality and how to reduce it provides a meaningful framework to understand the lived experiences of individuals and how their lives might be changed, but does not seem to have been systematically addressed when thinking about and designing projects.

This resonates with CONCORD's previous analyses²⁹, which have shown that, in spite of the recognition of inequalities in international cooperation policies, **most EU Member States lack dedicated tools to ensure that inequality reduction is coherently, comprehensively and systematically embedded in their programmes**. This includes, inter alia, **lack of guidance on how to carry out an analysis of inequality trends** and their determinants in partner countries, and on **how to monitor the impacts on inequalities, including on the most marginalised groups**.

CONCORD recommends that the EU and EU Member States:

- **Mainstream inequality reduction in international cooperation and partnership strategies, policies and programmes.** This is not yet the case in all EU Member States and there are gaps in EU policies for international partnerships³⁰.
- **Make tackling inequalities a true priority by including it as a specific criterion in calls for funding and when evaluating and selecting project proposals.**
- **Design and implement tools to address inequalities multidimensionally³¹ in partner countries.** These include, among others, *ex ante* assessments of drivers of inequalities in the partner country, monitoring and evaluation of inequality trends, guidance and exchange of practices.
- **Involve in-country CSOs in producing analyses and assessments,** as they can offer unique knowledge of the drivers of inequalities in their countries.
- **Collect disaggregated data** in analyses and assessments, broken down into the categories of income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migrant status, disability and geographical location at a minimum.
- **Use the full potential of the OECD-DAC markers on disability and gender,** which Member States do not yet implement systematically and use comparable approaches and quality of reporting³². Where the European Commission does use both, it needs to ensure adequate financial and human resources to enable quality implementation. It should adopt the target of earmarking 20% of its Official Development Aid (ODA) for projects directly addressing the root causes of gender inequalities and having gender equality as a principal objective³³.
- **Implement the income inequality marker** that the European Commission adopted in 2022³⁴, *ex ante* and *ex post*, including the Distributional Impact Assessment. Implementation should capture the multiple dimensions of inequalities and the

29 "The Road to Equality", CONCORD, <https://concordeurope.org/resource/the-road-to-equality/>.

30 "Scoreboard for the EU's actions to tackle inequalities", CONCORD, <https://concordeurope.org/resource/scoreboard-for-the-eus-actions-to-tackle-inequalities/>.

31 A multidimensional approach to inequality takes into account various relevant dimensions to people's lives such as health, security, education and the ability to participate in decision-making. CONCORD has identified four dimensions of inequality: social, economic, climate-related and in relation to political participation, to which the digital divide can be added. More information: "Inequalities Unwrapped", CONCORD, <https://concordeurope.org/2019/11/18/inequalities-report-2019/>.

32 For an assessment of the disability marker, consult <https://www.edf-feph.org/content/uploads/2022/11/EDF-EC-ODA-marker-2022.docx>.

33 "AidWatch 2022", CONCORD, 2022, <https://aidwatch.concordeurope.org/2022-report/>

34 <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/2faa22b4-a8fb-11ed-b508-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-search>

intersections between them. The European Commission should conduct an assessment of the new marker in the medium term.

- **Invest in human resources and training in inequalities** for officials based in headquarters and in partner countries alike. This should include peer learning across EU Member States and between officials of the EU and its Member States.

A PEOPLE-CENTRED APPROACH TO TACKLING INEQUALITIES

The interesting examples from South Africa, Paraguay and Bangladesh illustrate key features aligned with CONCORD's definition of what a **people-centred approach** (PCA) to international cooperation involves³⁵.

1. Address multiple dimensions of inequalities and how they intersect

The projects show that a **multidimensional and intersectional**³⁶ approach is essential. Social reality comprises multiple dimensions of inequality, which compound and interact with each other. Giving due consideration to these multiple dimensions in the design and evaluation of projects will improve their impacts and ensure that the Leave No One Behind principle is upheld.

Projects with a primary focus on **gender equality** addressed **multiple dimensions of inequality**, including other types of social inequality (rural-urban divide), economic (living wages and access to services), and political (access to decision-making). Some projects encompassed the impact of climate change and the digital divide. By examining how gender equality intersects with other forms of discrimination and exclusion, these **projects were able to reach marginalised women**.

The remaining projects, most of which CONCORD found had taken gender equality into account, demonstrate the **importance of considering multiple dimensions simultaneously**. For example, from the outset the Bridging the Gap project in Paraguay considered the inequalities faced by people with disabilities in accessing decision-making. This ensured the project could effectively capture and

address the full range of inequalities they experience. Asivikelane, in South Africa, addressed inequalities in access to services experienced by people living in informal settlements by tackling their unequal access to the political process. The two examples illustrate how **multidimensionality and intersectionality are not an option, but a requirement for effective change**.

2. Engage with communities to address their experiences of inequalities

Although inequalities exist everywhere, **the ways they are framed, lived and experienced by people vary** across regions and countries, and within countries and communities.

Several of the projects we analysed included interesting practices of **community engagement**. For instance, the project that led to Casa de las Mujeres (Women's House) in Paraguay consulted women in order to plan actions that could better respond to their needs; in South Africa, the funding received by Women on Farms focused on developing an already existing community network of women farmers; and Action 4 Impact in Bangladesh focused on organising young people to raise awareness of their own needs.

Policy dialogue and CSO consultation are important tools for the EU and its Member States to understand the drivers of inequalities, the specific needs of communities and plan for more impactful programmes and projects. Such consultations can also encourage local ownership of European initiatives, enhance mutual trust and stimulate shared understanding of country-specific issues, perspectives and approaches.

The EU and EU Member State officials whom CONCORD met have been involved in dialogue with CSO partners in the country and have gained insights into their concerns and priorities. Yet, many of the CSO partners told CONCORD that there were gaps which might be filled by better dialogue. Some claimed that **the EU and EU Member States' dialogue with partner country governments took systematic precedence over the dialogue with CSOs**. Whereas this can be understandable in the framework of bilateral relations, the shared feeling points to a disproportionate lack of consideration for dialogue with civil society. Some CSOs mentioned the **barriers**

³⁵ A people-centred approach puts people front and centre and prioritises the furthest behind. It focuses on realising people's social, economic, political and environmental rights and intersectional equality. It puts the achievement of rights and the well-being of people and the planet before profit. It promotes inclusive, participatory decision-making and co-creation of policies and actions in order to respond to the needs and improve the lives of all people (working definition of CONCORD as of February 2023).

³⁶ Intersecting inequalities are the persistent combination of disadvantages linked to a person's characteristics and identity (e.g., gender, age, disability, caste, etc.). Groups and individuals facing intersecting inequalities experience magnified discrimination, dramatically diminishing and undermining their potential capabilities compared with the rest of the population.

they experienced in accessing European funding programmes, including requirements they struggle to meet, such as partnering with Europe-based organisations, and unequal treatment once they become project partners.

One concern is the perception that **Europe is increasingly disengaging from their countries**: “The assumption that the South African government will step in to fund CSOs is wrong; we still need donors to support us”, said Joseph Eliabson, from African Monitor. Similarly, in Paraguay, CSO partners³⁷ expressed concern about the fact that the country’s transition to an upper-middle-income status may result in European donors withdrawing and were worried that a narrow focus on GDP growth may motivate this decision despite persistent inequalities.

3. Focus on long-term change

For programmes and projects to effectively tackle inequalities and promote systemic change, it is crucial to ensure their sustainability. This involves **local ownership and embedding their outcomes within the local ecosystem** for long-term viability.

“Systemic change doesn’t happen overnight, it takes time. But once you build the capacity of a community to address inequalities, they don’t require us anymore”, said Tanjir Hossain from ActionAid International’s office in Bangladesh.

The projects analysed demonstrated interesting ways in which long-term change can be implemented. For example, the Village Courts in Bangladesh strengthened the existing national system of local justice courts; Asivikelane in South Africa established a sustainable channel for residents of informal settlements to communicate their needs to the government; and Bridging the Gap in Paraguay shaped national policies and secured new commitments from the government for the inclusion of people with disabilities. Asked about the success factors of the latter, Fernando Rey, from Spanish cooperation in Paraguay, explained that the relationship between the different institutions of the State and civil society was crucial.

However, the positive impacts on the lives of groups and individuals, and the ability to produce long-term results, **do not always translate into true systemic change, understood as a structural change in the way the political and economic systems function, and that benefits everyone.** After years of European

cooperation, some CSO partners explicitly expressed their wish to see Europe contributing to deeper change. “We see little structural change”, claimed one CSO partner in Paraguay. Ahmed Swapan Mahmud, from VOICE, stated that “both the EU and Bangladesh should act together to get good value for money. There are huge challenges and there are no appropriate and comprehensive transparent public mechanisms monitoring aid and its effectiveness in reality.”

4. Support communities’ efforts to defend human rights

One of the most prominent roles our CSO partners associate with the EU and its Member States is the support given for the protection and promotion of human rights. This helps them **raise the visibility of human rights issues which their governments may feel reluctant or hostile about** and may encourage partner countries to **initiate a dialogue** about previously neglected issues.

“The EU is a strategic partner for South Africa and it is a helpful one. South African CSOs **need the EU for issues such as fighting corruption or gender-based violence**”, said Joseph Eliabson from African Monitor. CSO representatives in Paraguay shared a similar analysis. “**The European Union gives strength to the issues of inclusion and non-discrimination.** By supporting actions in relation to indigenous communities, or by raising the LGBTQI+ flag, the EU highlights the need to put these groups at the centre of the attention.” The EU funds the annual human rights report of CODEHUPY, the Paraguayan network of human rights CSOs.

The projects we assessed contribute in different ways to the protection and promotion of human rights. Several of them focus on **supporting communities’ agency to defend human rights**, such as the project to improve shelters for survivors of gender-based violence in South Africa, Action 4 Impact and its focus on young people’s collective action, or the support for women in a marginalised community in Asunción (Paraguay) that resulted in the Casa de las Mujeres.

³⁷ The views of Paraguayan CSO partners were gathered at a meeting that CONCORD organised in Asunción (Paraguay) on 22 July 2022. It brought together eight CSOs (Decidamos, Alter Vida, Sobrevivencia, Codehupy, Pojoaju, CDIA, Plan Internacional, CIRDA) and one academic institution (UNIBE).



CONCORD recommends that the EU and EU Member States:

- **Recognise and tackle the multiple dimensions of inequalities and the ways they intersect when designing programmes** and projects, by using the tools described above. Looking at intersecting inequalities through an analytical lens will create understanding of how multiple, combined sources of discrimination can exacerbate inequalities in access to and enjoyment of human rights. This is indispensable to generate long-lasting outcomes that leave no one behind.
- **Make explicit commitments and provide guidance on how to implement jointly and in synergy the three available equality markers** (OECD-DAC gender and disability markers and the European Commission's income inequality marker); equip officials to use tools such as the EU's Human Rights-Based Approach toolbox³⁸ or the guidance on addressing inequalities³⁹.
- **Meaningfully and inclusively engage with communities and local CSOs in partner countries** to ensure a solid understanding of their context and true local ownership of programmes and projects. This means ensuring a level playing field between CSOs active at the EU level and local ones and include issues of consultation and access to funding⁴⁰. CONCORD's seven practices for civil society participation in EU decision-making offer useful guidance in this regard.
- **Ensure a solid human rights-based approach** across all programmes and projects, including engagement with human rights activists and support for their causes in dialogue with the governments of partner countries.
- **Work with the partner country government to ensure systemic change and plan for sustainable and long-term change, by ensuring that actions are locally owned.** This requires dialogue with partner country governments to influence policy change and capacity strengthening at national level, acting on multidimensionality and intersectionality and engaging with communities and local CSOs.

POLICY COHERENCE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, A KEY CONDITION

Reducing inequalities and ensuring no one is left behind are a specific Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 10). Yet, as recognised by the European Commission⁴¹, **all other SDGs relate, more or less directly, to addressing inequalities** in their multiple dimensions.

Several of the projects we analysed referred explicitly to the SDGs they contribute to.

To achieve the SDGs and tackle inequalities, Europe must proactively collaborate with partner regions and countries **and avoid generating negative impacts through its policies.**

Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD) is the framework which makes it possible to assess how different government or EU actions create synergies or contradict one another⁴². It is therefore a critical tool to evaluate where the EU and its Member States stand in relation to the SDGs and inequalities.

Our partners in South Africa, Paraguay and Bangladesh all pointed to incoherences. **These can reportedly outweigh the positive effects of European-funded projects.** The impression that Europe 'gives with one hand and takes away with the other' was conveyed in the views they shared with CONCORD: "Bangladesh is becoming a middle-income country. The role of aid and trade has changed. The EU and donor countries are more interested in trade agreements, private sector investments, and so on. Development dialogue especially with civil society in the country is much less frequent compared to past decades", said Tanjir Hossain, from ActionAid International.

For our partners in Paraguay and South Africa, Europe's **trade policies** are also of significant concern. In Paraguay, the European demand for soy, which aggravates the expulsion of indigenous people from their lands, or the focus of the trade agreements that the EU intends to reach with Mercosur, are cause for concern. Partners also pointed to **Europe's focus on big business relationships** in their country,

38 European Commission, *Staff Working Document on Applying the Human Rights Based Approach to international partnerships - An updated Toolbox or placing rightsholders at the centre of EU's Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation*, 2022, https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/document/download/54c77670-4179-49f0-9af3-d1b18ff2d41f_en?filename=swd-2021-human-right-based-approach_en.pdf.

39 European Commission, *Directorate-General for International Partnerships, Addressing income inequalities through development cooperation: a quick guide*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2022, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2841/209509>.

40 For detailed recommendations check the 2023 CONCORD papers "Funding local women's rights organisations and feminist movements for transformative change" <https://concordeurope.org/resource/funding-local-womens-rights-organisations-for-transformative-change/> and "Funding for Civil Society Organisations in the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument - Global Europe".

41 European Commission, *Directorate-General for International Partnerships, Addressing income inequalities through development cooperation: a quick guide*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2022, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2841/209509>.

42 "A test of the EU's integrity towards the 2030 Agenda", CONCORD, 2022, <https://concordeurope.org/resource/a-test-of-the-eus-integrity-towards-the-2030-agenda-the-status-of-policy-coherence-for-sustainable-development/>

as opposed to smaller, sustainable and inclusive ones. “Big companies, and a push for big data and digitalisation seem to be on the cards at the moment, rather than small, sustainable activities”, said Vanessa Black, from Biowatch, South Africa.

There is a strong perception that **the geopolitical context is accelerating a shift in priorities away from sustainable development** and may add to the incoherences already observed. One example is the demand for natural resources which can be detrimental to the partner countries: “The energy crisis in Europe seems to be increasing pressure on prospection for gas reserves along the coastline”, said Ms. Black. Many expressed concerns over the risk of being forgotten by Europe and receiving decreasing levels of funding as a result of the war in Ukraine.



CONCORD recommends that the EU and EU Member States⁴³:

- **Include a PCSD assessment, *ex ante* and *ex post*, in all consultations on new policies and programmes**, and consult relevant stakeholders from Europe and partner regions systematically and meaningfully.
- **Develop strategies and overarching implementation plans for the Sustainable Development Goals**, which include impact assessments, to ensure that all policies adhere to PCSD principles.
- **Ensure that any progressive domestic commitments on sustainable development and equality also apply to international partnerships.** For instance, the European Commission must ensure the Social Economy Action Plan it adopted in 2021 has a truly international dimension⁴⁴, by enabling EU Delegations to identify and structure a dialogue with sustainable and inclusive businesses, which can play a powerful role in tackling inequalities⁴⁵.
- **Increase the transparency of their partnerships with partner countries**, including not only international cooperation programmes and projects but also the impacts of all other EU actions on the country, to improve monitoring, and detect and redress inconsistencies.

THINKING BIGGER



In summary, our research highlights the efforts of the EU and Member States to fund projects that are addressing people’s experiences of inequalities. These initiatives provide valuable insights into what further actions can be taken to address systemic inequalities. Our findings also underscore the critical role of civil society as well as committed and well-equipped EU officials in tackling inequalities. While progress has been made, it is evident that EU and Member States must do much more to contribute to more just and equitable societies, including by systematising, scaling-up, and replicating programmes that target inequalities and are owned by communities. By embracing our recommendations and committing to bold and ambitious action, the EU and its Member States have a unique opportunity to make significant progress towards a more equal world, where everyone can thrive.

⁴³ For more detailed recommendations that target the EU, please see “A test of the EU’s integrity towards the 2030 Agenda”, CONCORD, 2022, <https://concordeurope.org/resource/a-test-of-the-eus-integrity-towards-the-2030-agenda-the-status-of-policy-coherence-for-sustainable-development/>

⁴⁴ “Aligning the Social Economy Action Plan with the EU’s international partnerships”, CONCORD, 2021, <https://concordeurope.org/2021/12/23/op-ed-aligning-the-social-economy-action-plan-with-eus-international-partnerships/>.

⁴⁵ “Mind Our Business”, CONCORD, FTAO and Cooperatives Europe, 2021, <https://concordeurope.org/2020/12/01/mind-our-business-amplify-the-transformative-power-of-sustainable-and-inclusive-business-models-through-eu-external-action/>.

OUR MEMBERS

<p>NATIONAL PLATFORMS</p>	 <p>Global Responsibility Assistant Platform for Development and Humanitarian Aid</p>	 <p>BELGISCH PLATFORM PLATE-FORME BELGE CONCORD CNCB-11.11.11 11.11.11 ACODEV ngo-federatie</p>	 <p>BPID Bulgarian Platform for International Development</p>	 <p>Platforma za međunarodnu građansku solidarnost Hrvatske Croatian Platform for International Citizen Solidarity CROSOL</p>	 <p>FORS</p>	 <p>GLOBAL FOCUS The Irish CSDs for Development Cooperation</p>
 <p>AKÜ</p>	 <p>fingo</p>	 <p>COORDINATION SUD</p>	 <p>VENRO ASSOCIATION OF GERMAN DEVELOPMENT AND HUMANITARIAN AID NGOs</p>	 <p>Hellenic Platform for Development</p>	 <p>HAND</p>	 <p>dóchas The Irish Association of Non-Governmental Development Organisations</p>
 <p>Network delle ONG in Europa per lo sviluppo e l'emergenza CONCORD ITALIA</p>	 <p>LAPAS Latvian Platform for Development Cooperation</p>	 <p>Cercle de coopération des ONGD DU LUXEMBOURG</p>	 <p>SKOP Solidarjetät u Koperazzjoni</p>	 <p>PARTOS</p>	 <p>ZAGRANICA</p>	 <p>ONGD PLATAFORMA PORTUGUESA</p>
 <p>FOND Fondazione Organizzazione Regenerazione e Sviluppo di Ricerca</p>	 <p>Ambrella Platform for Development Organisations</p>	 <p>SLOGA Slovenian Global Action</p>	 <p>LA COORDINADORA DE ORGANIZACIONES PARA EL DESARROLLO</p>	 <p>C&NCORD SWEDEN</p>	 <p>bond</p>	<p>NETWORKS</p>
 <p>actalliance eu formerly APRODEV</p>	 <p>actionaid</p>	 <p>ADRA</p>	 <p>Alliance 2015 TOWARD THE ERADICATION OF POVERTY</p>	 <p>care</p>	 <p>caritas europa</p>	 <p>ChildFund Alliance</p>
 <p>CIDSE together for global justice</p>	 <p>eucord European Council of Organisations for Relief and Development</p>	 <p>GNDR</p>	 <p>Habitat for Humanity</p>	 <p>handicap international humanity & inclusion</p>	 <p>IPPF International Planned Parenthood Federation European Network</p>	 <p>LIGHT FOR THE WORLD</p>
 <p>OXFAM International</p>	 <p>PLAN INTERNATIONAL</p>	 <p>Save the Children</p>	 <p>Sightsavers</p>	 <p>solidar</p>	 <p>SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES INTERNATIONAL</p>	 <p>Terre des Hommes International Federation</p>
 <p>wecf</p>	 <p>Wetlands INTERNATIONAL</p>	 <p>World Vision EU REPRESENTATION</p>	 <p>WWF</p>	<p>ASSOCIATE MEMBERS</p>	 <p>alda European Association for Local Democracy</p>	 <p>CARDET</p>
 <p>Ea ea EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS</p>	 <p>EUROPEAN PARTNERSHIP FOR DEMOCRACY</p>	 <p>EUROPEAN DISABILITY FORUM</p>	 <p>INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE</p>	 <p>NRC NORWEGIAN REFUGEE COUNCIL</p>	 <p>Co-funded by the European Union</p>	

