

After more than ten years the Policy Dialogue Consortium Project led by horizont3000 in a consortium with CARE Austria, Caritas Austria and SOS Kinderdörfer with East African partners CARE Uganda, DESECE, GROOTS Kenya, PACIDA and SOS children's villages Tanzania and Uganda has come to a close. We can proudly state, then project has been a success! Partners have been equipped with the tools to engage, all of them have strategically adopted policy dialogue within their field of action and within their organisations, shaped policies on local and regional or county level. Most importantly, many of them cascaded their knowledge to other partners or champions.

What are the most important lessons that can inform future programming or similar initiatives?

1.1.1 Overall lessons

- **A phased and long-term capacity development approach is effective.** Gradual progression from foundational concepts to practice and institutionalisation strengthened policy dialogue competencies over time. The consortium project adopted a sequenced capacity-building process moving from foundational to advanced policy dialogue skills, which enabled partner CSOs to professionalise and institutionalise policy dialogue within their organisations. For instance, most partner CSOs evolved from project-based advocacy to structured organisation-wide policy dialogue integrated into strategies, planning, and governance.
- **Capacity development is most impactful when theory is paired with real-world application.** The use of Small Action Funds enabled organisations to translate training into concrete policy dialogue processes and outcomes. The combination of theoretical training with practical application via Small Action Funds was key to success, allowing CSOs to apply learned concepts in real policy dialogue interventions. For example, through SAFs, SOS CV Uganda and CARE Uganda supported grassroots groups to engage effectively on issues like child marriage and GBV, leading to concrete policy improvements such as bylaws and local action plans.
- **Institutionalisation requires leadership commitment and organisational integration.** Policy dialogue was sustained where it was embedded into strategies, plans, job roles, and governance structures, and supported by senior management and boards. Several CSOs developed policy dialogue strategies, designated focal persons, and established coordination mechanisms with strong senior management and board engagement. For example, SOS CV Uganda developed a policy dialogue strategy integrated into annual planning and budgeting, while CARE Uganda linked policy dialogue to a core working group with representation across programmes.
- **Institutionalisation is strengthened when initiated early in the programme.** Embedding policy dialogue into organisational systems and strategies should begin from the outset, rather than after capacity building is complete, as indicated by stakeholder consultations and comparative analysis across partner organisations. Early anchoring allows more time for consolidation, ownership, and sustainability. The findings highlight that while some organisations have made progress, institutionalisation is uneven and often

depends on a few committed individuals, with limited formal onboarding and knowledge transfer, as reported by multiple interviewees and reflected in organisational practices.

- **Integrating policy dialogue into existing strategic partnerships enhances efficiency.** Long-standing, trust-based partnerships provided continuity, reduced transaction costs, and enabled follow-up and learning; stand-alone partnerships were more administratively demanding and harder to sustain. Long-term partnerships like Caritas Austria-PACIDA and CARE Austria-CARE Uganda facilitated trust, shared practices, and integration of SAF activities, enabling deeper organisational development and follow-up. In contrast, the cooperation with SOS CV Tanzania, which was outside a broader partnership framework, was described as positive but administratively heavier with fewer opportunities for sustained engagement
- Cascading approaches extend policy dialogue capacity beyond lead CSOs. Partner organisations acted as hubs, transferring skills to local CSOs, community actors, and activists - broadening coalitions and deepening local ownership. Partner CSOs like SOS CV Uganda, CARE Uganda, and GROOTS Kenya cascaded policy dialogue skills to local organisations and community activists through training and mentoring, which led to increased community engagement. This multiplier effect enhanced collaboration among CSOs, communities, and governments.
- **Contextual relevance and grounding in community priorities build legitimacy and political buy-in.** Policy dialogue resonated where it addressed widely recognised local issues and linked them to existing policy frameworks, increasing uptake at both community and government levels. Projects addressed issues deeply relevant to communities, such as GBV, child marriage, and climate adaptation, which facilitated ownership and motivation among CSOs and local authorities. For example, CARE Uganda linked work on Women, Peace, and Security to post-conflict realities in Gulu, and SOS CV Uganda translated national laws into local bylaws against child marriage, enhancing government buy-in.
- **Aligning policy dialogue with existing national policy frameworks increases relevance and uptake.** When policy dialogue is linked to recognised national priorities and legal frameworks, it gains legitimacy, strengthens government ownership, and improves prospects for implementation. Linkages to national frameworks, such as Uganda's National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security and Kenya's county-level climate policies, helped frame local priorities as contributions to national commitments. This approach facilitated political buy-in and important policy results, including new bylaws and county acts.
- **Structured approaches are most scalable when they are flexible and context-responsive.** The project's policy dialogue model was considered replicable because core concepts and tools were standardised, while application was adapted to locally identified priorities and organisational realities. Flexibility enabled partners to integrate the approach into different thematic and geographic contexts. The SAFs model was repeatedly highlighted as transferable and adaptable across contexts.

- **Wider impact requires both horizontal (geographic) and vertical (national) anchoring.** The approach can be replicated in other districts or counties facing similar issues (e.g., GBV, child protection, climate-related vulnerabilities). This is already being taken forward through the scaling of the approach within the region under the Policy Dialogue East Africa project. However, lasting, and wider impact depends on national-level political commitment, budget allocation, and policy alignment - linking bottom-up learning to top-down mandates. Geographic scaling is evident in the replication of models like SOS CV's translation of national laws into local bylaws in other Ugandan districts and PACIDA's policy approaches across counties in Kenya. However, the findings note the need for national political commitment and alignment to sustain and scale local policy gains.