

# IWDA STAKEHOLDER PERCEPTION REVIEW

2021-2022

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The objective of the Stakeholder Perception Review is to obtain feedback from IWDA stakeholders on IWDA and its work in order to provide IWDA with insights about the effectiveness and impact of its work and promote organisational learning. This review is the second annual review, with the first review piloted in 2020-21, and has targeted a different set of stakeholders. A risk assessment determined negligible risks to participants, and this review was conducted by an external consultant to promote both positive and negative feedback. To protect interviewee confidentiality, responses included in this report are de-identified, with the exception of the case study where permission was granted to waive confidentiality.

Nine of IWDA's stakeholders were interviewed for this report. They were divided into two groups – resourcing stakeholders and collaboration stakeholders. There were four interviews including nine individuals in total with the resourcing partners, and five interviews with five individuals for the collaboration stakeholders. The interview group was made up one seven women of colour from the global south, five white women from Australia and the UK, and one white Australian man. A constraint that emerged through the interviews was that many of the interviewees worked closely with only one or two IWDA staff and didn't feel they could reflect on the work or approach of the broader organisation. Nevertheless, a number of themes did emerge, across both groups. This report will first focus on the common themes, and then provide some additional and specific resourcing stakeholder responses. Finally, the report provides interviewee responses on what IWDA could do to improve its performance, and what interviewees are hoping for in the future from IWDA.

## 1. COMMON THEMES WHICH EMERGED FROM THE INTERVIEWS

Both sets of stakeholders were asked to describe their relationship to IWDA and reflect on IWDA's approach to its work, and a set of common themes emerged. This statement from an interviewee gives a good overview of the common themes which were identified in the interviews: *“Expertise and resources, advocacy, strategic planning, and communication skills; that expertise is a big contribution. Also, the personal support and affirmation that IWDA staff give. In the background to that, their connection to their program partners, that lived experience on the ground. That network is a resource they bring as well.”*

Another interviewee simply said, in response to a question about IWDA's strengths, *“high quality people and analysis”* which was a consistent perspective across the interviews.

### INTER-PERSONAL AND RELATIONSHIP BUILDING SKILLS

The interviewer pushed interviewees to clarify what they meant when they said things like 'strong relationships,' 'real partnerships,' 'caring and thoughtful,' or 'personal affirmation and support.' One of the responses very clearly spelt out what all these comments about the quality of IWDA's relational work were trying to express:

*“The importance of walking with people, that you're genuinely in it with them, you value them as people. It's not an instrumental relationship. It's an unspoken thing – we're not just using you; we're building a relationship that's real and will last. That's there, it's seen in the way IWDA staff work, and it's appreciated. Trust is enormously important. The way IWDA staff worked built trust. . . putting in, not expecting the activists to do all the work, working on small teams with the activists, demonstrating commitment.”*

*“They are able to establish real relationships of trust with local feedback. The informal feedback is that partners appreciate the way IWDA works, they see it as a real partnership.”*

### ENABLING SUPPORT TO PARTNERS

Almost all interviewees spoke about IWDA's approach to supporting partners. The universal view was that IWDA's approach combines an organisational commitment to enabling and supporting (rather than leading) partners, skilled 'human to human' interactions which are cognisant of power differentials, and appropriate technical support.

*"I see them now as enablers of local organisations who are better than IWDA. Stronger in the field and taking all the risks. The best thing we can do is facilitate organisations like that."*

*"They provided a lot of resources and input to the women who were driving that campaign. IWDA didn't drive the campaign but provided resources to back them up. Media advice, funding, training, and strategic planning support. Has been a huge benefit to the activists on that campaign."*

*"Producing papers to enable advocacy work. Backing up other actors, making other resources available, including funding for campaign managers."*

*"We see IWDA as a technical support provider with a feminist lens . . . the added value that we've seen is their ability to provide local partners with technical support. Capacity building for staff and management teams, financial support etc. They're able to do this with very specific support, tailored support, because they've built trust-based relationships. What we have heard from their in-country partners is that IWDA support has helped them build their capacity to do their work."*

In response to the follow-up question 'how do they create 'enabling partnership?' one interviewee said: *"through the way they do human to human interactions. And the tools they use, they work hard at making sure the tools are locally relevant and easy for local partners to use, like appropriate M&E systems."*

Two interviewees very carefully spelt out that the enabling environment IWDA creates isn't just about caring and supportive interpersonal relationships, it is more structural and intentional than that.

*"Their support is organisational, which is more important than person to person. Not just one friendly person, but a whole organisation creating a safe space, which makes me want to come back to them."*

*"[IWDA is a] feminist organisation that lives by its feminist values and comes to their downstream partners with a best practice feminist approach. I've tried to characterise it as a feminist approach rather than women being cuddly."*

## TECHNICAL SKILLS AND ANALYSIS

A wide range of interviewees discussed the technical skills and analysis work that IWDA does as a significant strength of the organisation. When the interviewer asked one interviewee to expand on what they meant by 'technical skills' the response was *"intellectual heft, specialist knowledge and technical skills, useful resources and content expertise."*

The discussion around technical skills was largely with reference to the kind of technical support which IWDA provides to partners: *"IWDA brings a strong technical support to local partners that allows them to focus on operational work. Other international partners don't give the same high-level technical support, and that can lead to the work stopping and starting . . . research, analysing data, trying to include research in reporting. Local partners don't always have time to do that."*

The discussion around analysis, research and content knowledge was prominent in the interviews on the Australia Feminist Foreign Policy Coalition. All interviewees spoke of the strong intellectual contribution IWDA is making to instigating and leading the conversation on feminist foreign policy in Australia and the region. One interviewee spoke about the quality of the thinking work done in support of the Australia Feminist Foreign Policy Coalition: *"There's been a real focus on human security in the work we've been doing. Caring about individual level security, that perspective has been really well brought in by IWDA. They've used our platform as a way to get that perspective into what could have been a more traditional security agenda."*

*"They're trying to shape the debate around feminist foreign policy, with academics, politicians, and non-government organisations. Framing the way we think about it and talk about it. Doing a lot to help shape the way we talk about the issues."*

*"They provided a lot of the engagement on the research in terms of who is using it, who is appreciating it. They have great networks of collaborators, academics, and stakeholders. They provide a lot of organisational support, making things happen, getting things organised. They have a lot of content expertise, they're always across everything. And they always provide valuable feedback on written work."*

*"Staff are informed, professional, and have a clear agenda. A clearly focused research agenda on trying to figure out what feminist foreign policy is and what they can do with that in the Australian context."*

In response to the question ‘what do you value most about IWDA’s approach?’ one interviewee said: *“Their content knowledge. They’re well aware of current and ongoing developments in foreign policy and international relations. Who’s doing what, where, and people’s views on X, Y, and Z. It’s always easy to pop them a quick question and know you’ll get a useful answer, and I am always assured that they will know the answers to questions I can’t answer about the most recent developments. That’s very reassuring.”*

## PROFESSIONALISM AND ENGAGEMENT

A common response to questions on what interviewees value about IWDA’s approach was ‘professionalism.’ The term ‘engagement’ was also used frequently. The interviewer asked follow-up questions to draw out what people meant by ‘professional’ or ‘professionalism’, and some of the responses are provided below.

*“They maintain strong communication, provide us with regular updates, and we appreciate that. It indicates a good working relationship with their partners on the ground (having regular and up to date information).”*

*“Communicative, thorough, interactions with them have never been a waste of time. It hasn’t felt like tick box exercise; it has felt like a genuine conversation. They were eager to learn more, and the engagement didn’t feel like a one-off, it felt like a genuine attempt to build a longer-term relationship.”*

*“Collaborative. Their approach of including everyone makes sure everyone’s voices are respected and heard.”*

*“Very committed to their work. Their levels of energy and passion are unmatched by many other organisations. They show their commitment by the way they work, and their energy. They always seem very ready. I’m not sure if they sleep, they’re always very peppy.”*

*“Great at working around people’s schedules. It’s really great to have them being so flexible. Very understanding about people’s workloads.”*

*“How proactive they have been. Sending reports before we need them, following up with us on new opportunities. That way of working has helped us move forward with our programs.”*

On the Australia Feminist Foreign Policy Coalition one interviewee noted: *“I’ve been impressed with the professionalism and thinking. Quality and professionalism of communications and social media.”*

Follow-up questions on what was meant by ‘engagement’ and ‘engaging’ drew the following responses:

*“‘Engaging’ because it’s a remote working environment, with different time zones. IWDA has been quick and responsive given the time differences and the difficult situation. We have a good relationship.”*

*“They are always across everything. The latest development in feminist foreign policy across the world, the latest research. They’re proactive – always on the front foot. Good at follow-up, which is useful for busy people. The way they follow-up is useful, never mean, just helpful and appreciated.”*

## A GROWING FOCUS ON ADVOCACY

In the 2021 stakeholder perception review interviews, advocacy rarely came up as one of the strengths of the organisation, or the aspects of IWDA’s approach most valued by interviewees. In the 2022 interviewees, no doubt because of the set of interviewees nominated, advocacy was a strong theme.

*“In my recent experience, its coming into a more advocacy focused role. Not that they’re not doing programs. But the move into advocacy is a progression of resources and capacity.”* A follow-up question was asked, ‘do you see that as a positive evolution for IWDA?’ The response: *“Yes, but I always think advocacy has to be linked to programs. They’ve got to speak out of the experiences of people on the ground.”*

In response to the question ‘what do you value most about IWDA’s approach?’ one interviewee said: *“That they’re thinking about advocacy at different levels, and how to strengthen advocacy skills. Also, that they’re thinking about regional groupings, and cross-country collaborations, like Cambodia and Myanmar. We’re learning from IWDA about good practice in this area.”* Another noted, specifically about the Australia Feminist Foreign Policy Coalition: *“I’ve been seriously impressed with the work done to set up the feminist foreign policy forum. So cleverly thought through, articulated, the way of building coalitions, getting people on board, the advocacy strategy.”*

In response to a follow-up question probing further on how IWDA had helped build advocacy skills one interviewee noted: *“Building on our skills, empowering our confidence level. Advocacy skills. They take us along to advocacy meetings with Ministers. It’s not direct advocacy training, but we learn from the experience. IWDA facilitated those meetings and de-briefed with us afterwards.”*

## THE FEMINIST/HUMAN RIGHTS LENS

Almost every interviewee, unsurprisingly, talked about the overtly feminist lens and feminist practice of IWDA when reflecting on what they value most about IWDA’s approach and practice.

*“I’m really taken by the importance of women in development. I’m impressed by IWDA’s partnership approach, just how much they work with local women and local women’s organisations. The focus on women’s empowerment and safety for women. IWDA seems really focused on women’s issues as important issues.”*

*“Women-focused, that’s the key thing. Over the years they’ve been both stable and unstable as an organisation, that’s no secret. These days, they’ve sharpened their focus on women’s rights.”*

*“They are explicitly feminist and transformative. All about the power structures and how you change them. IWDA is not about charity for even a second, it’s about disrupting power structures for greater empowerment of women. When I say feminist, I mean that as a method. I know IWDA is very intersectional in their approach to disrupting power structures.”*

*“Clarity of vision, and the importance of the topic that it deals with. It’s an absolutely fundamental topic, and there aren’t many competitors giving the same message. There’s a lot of value to having a narrow focus for strong advocacy that doesn’t get diluted by other issues.”*

*“The IWDA focus on women’s rights rather than more general development work is valuable to local partners and to us.”*

### Case study exemplifying the common themes

One interviewee gave a very clear example of how most of the themes above interacted in the support of the Myanmar Women’s Activists network. In this case, IWDA had a long-standing relationship with the diaspora community, demonstrated track record in working in the country and supporting activists, and close relationships in-country. *“IWDA has a history working in our community, and bringing in politicians to the work, in both Australia and Myanmar. Since before the coup IWDA has had a prominent voice in our network. IWDA are recognised and respected in our community, so it was meaningful when they supported us.”*

Because of this pre-positioning and legitimacy with the community, when IWDA swung in behind young women activities after the coup in 2021, they were able to provide meaningful support to the young women. *“Based on our culture women are not a priority, are not regarded as knowledgeable, or a voice to be listened to. They hear you, but they won’t listen. There were some instances where the 88 Generation’s voicers within the community were given priority, instead of listening to the action plans we proposed. We could have been shut down immediately, but with IWDA’s involvement and advocacy it was a reminder to organisations in our community that gender equity was an important issue. Because the CRPH NUG Support Group respects IWDA, they are being more inclusive and recognising gender balance.”*

The way IWDA staff worked with and enabled the group of young women activists was central to the success of IWDA’s support. *“IWDA helped them to find their voice. Because of the way they liaised, Myanmar women activists were able to find their place and speak up. IWDA played a part in starting the group. [The IWDA staff member] set up the meetings and the zoom links, attended the meetings, and gave us time to talk, gave support and space to young women activities that they didn’t get anywhere else. IWDA has given us time.”*

## 2. THE VIEW OF RESOURCING STAKEHOLDERS

There were a few key themes that were specific to the resource stakeholder interviews. The first was IWDA’s skill in interacting with funders, and particularly in understanding the interests, needs and limitations of the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

*“They’re very patient. Sometimes our requests are time sensitive, and they always respond quickly. They’re proactive with their communication. We are sometimes demanding in requesting information or asking for meetings and discussions. IWDA has handled all of this really well.”*

*“IWDA’s approach is often more politically and advocacy based than DFAT has appetite for. It’s been easy to talk to them about that, and about what DFAT can and can’t do. IWDA tries to straddle both program delivery and advocacy. IWDA tries to live its values which isn’t always easy.”*

*“Often as a donor you’re coddled, the answer is always yes, people provide things at the drop of a hat. It’s been good to get some pushback. I think it signals IWDA’s deep respect for beneficiaries when we’re told ‘they’re not comfortable with meeting you,’ or that suggested activities don’t fit within a partner’s programming scope or aren’t safe for them to do right now. Or when we’re told we can’t meet with a contact point in the evening because they have a family. But I guess not everyone at DFAT would respond the same way.”*

*“Personally, I really appreciate being able to reach out to IWDA about grantee partners where there are any issues. Seek their assessment, turn to them to learn more about our grantee partners.”*

*“We find IWDA effective in terms of advice provided to local partners and management support. A little bit different to other partners in the investments we manage. They listen to local partners, they hear, and if it’s something they can do to support them they will take the lead. If it’s something we need to know about, they’ll come back to us. We find a couple of other . . . managing partners overseas; they don’t do that.”*

*“Historically, and in the last 12 months, I see them as one of DFAT’s most effective international partners. [Their strength is] the feminist human rights-based approach and how effective they are at supporting partners to grow.”*

*“They are a feminist organisation that lives by its feminist values and comes to their downstream partners with a best practice feminist approach. Always ready to push back on donor ideas that won’t be good for partners, won’t suit partners. That can be challenging for donors, but it’s good practice.”*

When asked whether IWDA had surprised them in the last 12 months, most interviewees said no. *“No major surprises, they are big on comms, keep us informed when there are issues or challenges, and always have good mitigation measures ready.”*

*“Whenever there’s been a question around the programming, they’ve met us to ask, ‘where’s the line?’ They have good political insight into what DFAT is interested in and worried about.”*

The second theme was the sense that all the resourcing stakeholders have a lingering concern about funding an organisation that doesn’t have in-country offices or local staff. There was a sense that while supporting IWDA makes sense for now, for a range of geo-political reasons, there is an open question about the model of funding IWDA rather than directly funding local partners.

*“We tend to fund global south organisations, funding an Australian organisation is a divergence. IWDA are part of the feminist movement in the region, but we do have larger questions about funding an organisation that doesn’t have a local presence.”*

*“The fact that IWDA is Australia-based is tricky in some ways. If it hadn’t been for the military coup, we would have been looking for an on the ground organisation with a local presence offering deeper support to local partners.”*

*“We’ll be watching this space because COVID has done some good for the local non-government organisations. It has helped with the objectives of the grants as well, to have the local partners working and managing their own organisations, taking the lead.”*

### **3. WHAT IWDA COULD DO DIFFERENTLY**

There were a range of responses to what IWDA could do to improve their work, including reflections on how they work with both activists and powerholders.

*Over the last 12 months sometimes IWDA has driven quite hard, and you’ve had to ask, ‘whose agenda is this, is it IWDA’s or the women’s?’ There has been a slight edge of that. Sometimes the outcomes they wanted, say around a paper written as a background research piece, it was said ‘I want to be the one to use this, we have to get it done now’ . . . . the work was done in the best spirit, but it was clear that the campaign also needed to service IWDA’s approach and agenda . . . It’s easy to take over people who aren’t as resource*

*rich or powerful, easy to take over their way of doing things. I never heard anyone who wasn't grateful for IWDA, but there was tension in managing those competing needs and demands."*

*"On the flip side of that really strong feminist focus is the fact that you sort of know what IWDA is going to say about something. That can be a bit one-note, but the thing is, it's an important note! IWDA is always focused and on-message, and always giving the right message. So, the 'one-note' thing isn't a weakness, it's just a consequence of being really focused."*

*"IWDA has some easy points of access with Australian women parliamentarians, which is a strength, but can also be politically tricky. IWDA needs to be careful about the politics of its engagement with different stakeholders. There's no suggestion of wrongdoing, it just needs politically savvy management."*

*"They could focus more on women with disabilities. They could also share their access to international platforms, networks, and opportunities with their local partners."*

Some of the responses indicate that some interviewees didn't have as deep an understanding of the breadth of IWDA's work, or strategic approach, but the responses are all included here as they illustrate the need for IWDA to continue to promote its role and unpack its value-add with external stakeholders.

*"They could be more focused on Australia than they currently are. Their focus on our region is welcome and wonderful, but there's a big need to have the kind of conversations they're having internationally in Australia."*

*"Perhaps sometimes they don't cross advertise that they do program delivery as well as advocacy. I didn't know they did program delivery, and I know others who know about the program delivery but didn't know about the advocacy work."*

*"I wasn't aware of them before they reached out to me, perhaps they could do more to build their international profile."*

## **4. WHAT DO STAKEHOLDERS WANT TO SEE FROM IWDA IN THE FUTURE?**

Broad discussions with interviewees surfaced several suggestions regarding IWDA's future role, particularly in regard to issues of localisation and decolonisation, resource mobilisation, and sustainability.

With regards to IWDA embarking on some income generating work within the feminist movement: *"We're curious about feminist organisations trying to generate income, and it will be interesting to see how this will be perceived in IWDA's relationships with the feminist ecosystem. Those learnings might be useful for other organisations."*

*"I'm interested to see what role they'll play in resource mobilisation in the region. They're new to seeing themselves as donors, it will be interesting to see how they grow into or adjust to that role."*

*"In the past it was a very white organisation. Progress in terms of staff structure has been good, but slow. Having an all-white staff complement doesn't lend itself to being a robust development agency. Especially when there are other development agencies staffed by women of colour with local expertise. The changes so far have been good, but how do they relate to the senior staff cohort, long-standing Board members, new policies? When we can work with anyone, it's not to IWDA's advantage to be such a white organisation."*

*"COVID has raised up the local partners in management and decision making. Now they're only looking to IWDA when and if they have difficulties. That's a welcome improvement. COVID has let things grow in terms of local leadership. We hope they'll maintain this once travel becomes easier."*

*"Continue to support and be pivotal in making sure that women's voices don't die down. Things like mental well-being, the kind of support that the younger generation of women activists need, to bring back some positivity to the lives of young women activists who are struggling."*

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