



THE HOLIDAY ISSUE

For many of UNDEF's project organizations, 2020 has been the most challenging ever. The Holiday Issue is an opportunity to pay tribute to them. As UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed says in her message below, UNDEF's civil society grantees have shown exceptional creativity and courage in pivoting their projects to meet the challenges of Covid-19. As the challenges now move towards vaccines and recovery, UNDEF looks forward to working ever more closely with our project organizations around the world. Here is to a stronger and healthier new year.

UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed salutes UNDEF's project implementers

UNDEF's civil society grantees have shown exceptional creativity and courage in pivoting their projects to meet the challenges of Covid-19. Addressing the epidemic of misinformation that has spread around the virus, advancing media literacy especially among young people, empowering women to take action against domestic violence which has surged amid Covid-19 lockdowns, quarantines, and social and economic pressures -- these are just some of the critical interventions that demonstrate how civil society is at the vanguard of democracy. Their work is all the more inspiring given the shrinking of civic space that existed before the pandemic, and has worsened since. I thank the brave activists who implement UNDEF projects around the world.

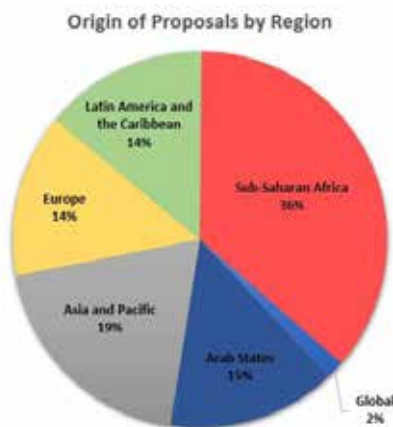
Amina J. Mohammed



Source: Global Citizen

Almost 2,000 groups submit project proposals amid pandemic

UNDEF's Fifteenth Round of funding received almost 2,000 applications from civil society across the globe, despite the implementation constraints posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The proposals originated from organizations across the globe, the vast majority local NGOs in Africa, Asia, Arab States, Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean. This year's Round encouraged applications focused on addressing challenges to civic space and democracy as a result of the Covid-19 crisis, in addition to themes of gender equality and female empowerment, community activism, rule of law and human rights, youth engagement, strengthening civil society interaction with government, media and freedom of information, electoral processes and promoting tools for knowledge.



Project proposals are subject to a highly rigorous and competitive selection process. A team of international experts score each proposal and produce a long list. To narrow down the list further, UN Resident Coordinators and Country Teams are invited to provide comments, quality vetting, and views on how proposed activities would fit in the overall context of existing UN work in the countries and fields proposed. The same comments are invited from relevant UN entities at UN Headquarters.

Based on this collective input, the UNDEF Secretariat produces a first short-list, expected to be confirmed mid-2021. Each short-listed applicant will be contacted with a request for a draft project document, which is in effect the contract between UNDEF and the grantee. The project document negotiation requires the applicant to provide a more elaborated project design and involves detailed input from both UNDEF and the applicant, as well as scrutiny and due diligence enquiries by UNDEF. Only upon successful conclusion of the project

NEWS FROM THE FIELD

Covid-19 & democracy in East Africa Conference: Protecting voters, protecting the vote



On 19 and 20 November 2020, the [Kofi Annan Foundation](#) and the [Society for International Development](#), supported by the United Nations Democracy Fund, held an online conference on democracy in East Africa in the context of Covid-19. The event explored the challenges the region is facing and sought to identify opportunities for protecting and promoting democratic norms and ensuring electoral integrity.

The conference brought together over 40 influential actors from Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, including experts on democracy, civil society representatives, and political party leaders. Across the two days, the speakers engaged in discussions aimed at helping put into context the many complicated questions facing East Africa. Speakers expressed their views and engaged in constructive debates linked to the future of democracy in the region.

The sessions brought into focus how certain governments have used the pandemic as an excuse to crackdown on the opposition and undermine democratic principles and human rights.



Current events in East Africa have only confirmed the relevance and timeliness of the conference. The panel discussions on Day 1 highlighted some of the background, trends, and challenges facing democracy in the region, like the pandemic itself, the formation and functioning of political parties, the role of institutions, the use and abuse of identity politics, and social media.

Day 2 explored the judiciary's critical role in building acceptance and tolerance for democracy in the manner through which it addresses electoral disputes and how political finance contributes to the distortion of democratic processes.

Panellists also explored how best to support civil society and approaches for promoting youth inclusion in political processes. The conference concluded with a discussion of the role and limits of the international community.

The discussions emphasised that democracy is always aspirational, a work in progress, and a shared responsibility. Most participants expressed a sense of hope for a brighter future where elections in East Africa are free, fair, and peaceful, and where democratic norms and the rule of law are upheld.

In January 2021, Kofi Annan Foundation will publish a report with the key takeaways from the conference and suggested approaches for strengthening electoral integrity throughout East Africa.



NEWS FROM THE FIELD



Protecting civic space for women in Uganda

An UNDEF-funded project in Uganda, “Advancing Women’s Electoral Participation in Uganda” is working to strengthen women’s participation as both voters and candidates in Uganda’s elections. In November, [Rural Women Empowerment Network](#) held its “Womanifesto” public dialogues on women in elections in Kyenjojo District – part of its efforts to galvanize women to become politically astute activists and leaders. Participants included political leaders and candidates, government technocrats, civil society, religious leaders and the media. Dialogues focused on addressing mechanisms to increase the number of women in electoral politics.



A key focus of the discussion was a session focused on mitigating the challenges of women’s shrinking civic space as a result of Covid-19. Participants identified increased challenges created by the pandemic for politicians and civil society such as; restrictions on public gatherings, limits on travel and events, closing of media platforms, difficulties of rural women and civic groups to access technology or use it effectively, and the severe economic impact to the resource base of civil society organizations. Participants discussed government measures to protect women’s civic space and opportunities for local civil society organizations to network and coordinate to monitor government responses and identify risks to women activists. As a result of the discussions, a district network on women leadership was formed to strengthen coordination and voice for women inclusive politics. By a majority vote, the participants agreed to name the network ‘Kyenjojo Women Leaders Forum’.

Boosting women’s political participation in Eswatini



An UNDEF-funded project in Eswatini seeks to enhance policies and practices to address inequality in the national electoral process and increase women’s participation. [Women and Law in Southern Africa](#) plan to achieve this by educating citizens on the importance of women’s political participation, while empowering the female electorate with leadership skills, campaign and mobilization strategies. The project has continued to run sensitisation meetings to underline the role women can play in the electoral process, overturning harmful cultural barriers that hinder women’s engagement in politics in Eswatini. Working with the Deputy Prime Minister’s Office, the project has included a COVID-19 safety training component into project activities to address challenges around political participation.



NEWS FROM THE FIELD

Advancing the rights of HIV+ women in the Russian Federation

UNDEF grantee [FOCUS-Media](#) has been working in the Russian Federation to empower HIV+ women to combat discriminatory treatment and advocate for their rights to access healthcare. In early December, Focus Media held a workshop in Moscow that brought together medical practitioners and women living with HIV to discuss alleviating stigmas and elucidating patient needs, rights and health care delivery for HIV+ women.



The discussion focused on building a relationship and mutual understanding between doctors and patients and methods to expand that learning to other medical professionals. Together, participants jointly planned outreach seminars for health professionals on addressing the needs, rights, and care of HIV+ women. During the meeting, all participants corrected and approved information and educational materials to be used at future seminars.

Covid-19 has created additional challenges for an already vulnerable community, which FOCUS-Media has been reactive to tackle. FOCUS-Media continues training gynaecologists in both Nizhny Novgorod and Rostov-on-Don, as well working to establish strong networks with hospitals and health authorities to consolidate protections for HIV+ women.

Taking environmental justice to Zoom in Ukraine

An UNDEF project, “Strengthening Environmental Democracy in Ukraine” is working to strengthen the capacity of civil society in environmental decision-making – striving to help move Ukraine towards cleaner environment with strong legal protections. In early December, [Environment-People-Law](#) have responded pragmatically to the challenges imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, re-designing the project’s institutional development trainings to a hybrid online and in-person format to train civil society to in effective methods and tools of environmental protection and to enable them to help raise the overall awareness of Ukrainians.

The project innovated to combine three trainings into one hybrid format which involved online and small, in-person socially distanced groups. A US-based environmental consultant helped to conduct the training sessions via Zoom. Savings as a result are being repurposed to produce an additional publication that will focus on participatory methods to advocate against land grabbing which will add additional value to the project.



NEWS FROM THE FIELD

Promoting Covid-19 hygiene practices in Armenia



In Armenia, an UNDEF-funded project implemented by [Armenian Women for Health and Healthy Environment](#) aims to contribute to sustainable management strategies of natural water resources in the Ararat Valley. This project has a focus on empowering women's groups to conceive and oversee sustainable strategies for using community water and sanitation resources. Pilot projects identify community-based participatory approaches to decision-making involving women to improve access and management of water resources. Part of the approach is to educate school children on sustainable management of community resources to increase public awareness and reduce poor hygiene practices that negatively affect the wider community.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the project has incorporated Covid-19 into its public awareness communications and has expanded its reach to additional communities. An additional community pilot project delivered hygiene kits, printed education materials and organized online and in-person interactive sessions. This format has allowed the project to reach out an additional 140 children in Shirak province – one of the poorest provinces in Armenia with harsh winters and greater vulnerability to seasonal respiratory infections. Hygiene and Covid-19 prevention interactive sessions were conducted to raise awareness of the importance of Covid-19 safety regulations to keep the community safe. This work is a contribution to national efforts in addressing the pandemic in Shirak province.

Increasing youth participation in El Salvador

In El Salvador UNDEF grantee [Fundación Salvadoreña para el Desarrollo Económico y Social](#) has turned the challenges of Covid-19 into an opportunity, adapting its in-person democracy training to a virtual format and doubling its graduating classes. The project, 'The Democracy Academy for Young Adults' is training and supporting young leaders to participate in spaces of civic dialogue, holding institutions accountable and defend the democratic system with civil society and key political actors. The project began in December 2019 with 100 leaders aged 18 to 25. Since the Covid-19 pandemic began, classes have been adapted to be conducted online. Savings from an online format have enabled the project to double the number of students and a second class will graduate in June 2021.

