

Final Evaluation of the Forus
EuropeAid Grant Agreement:
*A stronger International Forum of
National NGO Platforms for greater
impact on public policies*

Summary of conclusions and
recommendations

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Overview of the evaluation approach

Forus is a global network bringing together 68 national NGO platforms and seven regional coalitions from Africa, America, Asia, Europe and the Pacific.

Forus implemented the project *A stronger International Forum of National NGO Platforms for greater impact on public policies* from September 2016 to June 2021 with funding from the European Commission, Directorate General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA) and co-funding from Agence française de développement (AFD). The Forus project is implemented in the context of a Framework Partnership Agreement (FPA) with the European Commission, a mechanism designed to enable ongoing strategic cooperation in areas of mutual interest.

The total amount of funding provided is €4.5 million since 2016. Originally, the FPA was to come to an end in December 2020, but a no-cost extension was added until June 2021 due to delays and adaptations in activities during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The aim of the project is to enable development NGOs to influence public policies directly at national, regional and global levels “as full development actors in their own right, contributing directly to human rights and poverty eradication, and to achieve sustainable, equitable and inclusive development”.

The project’s three interlinked specific objectives are:

- 1) To strengthen Forus’ institutional, organisational and operational capacities;
- 2) To strengthen the capacity of national and regional Forus members, and of Forus itself, to achieve their objectives, to exchange and to learn;
- 3) To increase the impact and realise the full potential of Forus’ advocacy at national, regional and global levels, particularly on Agenda 2030 SDGs 16 and 17.

This final evaluation of the project commissioned by Forus in March 2021 has an emphasis on evaluating the external impact of the network under the “Influence” pillar of Forus’ work, thus focusing in particular on the advocacy and communication issues and activities. This focus is explained by a) the disproportionately greater availability of monitoring and evaluation data for the “Connect” and “Support” pillars of Forus’ work, and b) the long timeframe required for advocacy activities to have an impact, thus warranting a specific focus at the end of the project. The evaluation covers the full period of the project. The evaluation was undertaken by Nexus Research Cooperative, a not-for-profit company promoting progressive social research. Nexus is represented by Seán Ó Siochrú, Research Director, and is in association with Bruce Girard, research consultant.

The evaluation methodology included documentary analysis, interviews with key stakeholders, as well as a survey delivered to Forus members by Keystone Accountability. One-to-one interviews comprised the central part of data gathering, and totalled 34 including: Forus Staff and representatives (9), Forus members (9), Non-Forus CSOs (7), Intergovernmental and Governmental Organisations (8), and a Communications Expert (1). Four case studies were developed focusing on collaboration with Forus members in Denmark, South Korea and Nepal, as well as the communications campaign *March With Us*.

Summary of findings

The following summarises the findings in relation to the evaluation questions, and draws some additional conclusions where relevant.

1. To what extent, and in what ways, have Forus advocacy activities had an impact internationally on Agenda 2030 and on other global development issues?

High Level Political Forum (HLPF) Side events: The HLPF side-events, at which Forus usually played a central co-organising role with members and CSO partners, offer major opportunities to CSOs to share their knowledge and insights among each other and with others, but also to develop common positions and to present joint proposals. These collective proposals can have a particular impact on Agenda 2030 (for instance relating to the review process), especially when reinforced through Forus' targeted lobbying of, for instance, European governments. These activities have also given Forus influence at high level meetings.

Finance in Common Summit (FICS): The impact of Forus at the FICS Paris event can be judged by the extent to which civil society messages are reflected in the final Declaration. Although these are limited, it is plausible to conclude that many would not be there at all were it not for Forus efforts, working with other CSOs. Forus used its central position on the FICS Executive Committee to ensure that as wide a possible cross section of CSOs could participate and be heard in a meaningful way. The Forus Chair was also asked to represent the wider coalition of CSOs with a presentation at the final FICS Plenary, indicative of the influence and high standing of Forus at the event.

Research: The Forus impact at events is also strengthened through bringing good quality research results, often drawing on its member networks and knowledge. Maintaining a tight focus on SDG 16 and SDG17 has also helped to concentrate the impact.

Civic Space and #UNMute Civil Society: So far, Forus has undertaken scoping research and is in the process of developing its strategy relating to influencing the shrinking space for civil society. The **#UNMute Civil Society** is the most significant of the Forus campaigns and is pursued strongly internationally by Forus and its members, especially its Danish member as an initiator. The Danish government has also brought this to the international stage, and, with the Finnish government, about 60 governments have expressed support for the basic pledge in the campaign.

The #MarchWithUs campaign also enabled Forus to link beyond Agenda 2030 actors into gender related development issues, linking local activities into a global context.

2. To what extent have Forus policy & advocacy messages contributed to influencing government and policy-maker positions and thinking, particularly around civil society participation and civil society financing?

As noted already, the issue of defending and expanding civic space is now higher on the agenda of Danish development policy, and a fund has been set aside to support concrete actions. With impetus from the #UNMUTE campaign, the issues of civil society participation has also been brought to the HLPF through CSO and government cooperation.

It is also noteworthy that 80% of Forus members agree that the results of Forus' *Scoping Study of CSO Platform Experiences in Promoting Enabling Environment* in 2020 were useful, and that 49% agree strongly.

A wider interpretation of this question relates to how Forus contributes to the approach and thinking of its own strategic funding partners, specifically the AFD and the European Commission DG INTPA. Has Forus influenced their positions and thinking?

The AFD Project Officer believes that there is growing awareness of Forus approaches and policies within AFD at the HQ in Paris, but also notes that it takes time to exert a deeper influence. Significant effort is also required to enable the project officer to, in effect, promote a Forus approach within the organisation and particularly at Field Office level. Here, value-added ideas are needed.

With the European Commission’s DG INTPA, Forus has – unlike other FPAs –succeeded in engaging in a high level dialogue on the role of and processes for civil society to engage in the wider Agenda 2030 environment. While concrete changes have not materialised from this, at least as yet, and the dialogue is paused, Forus has succeeded in developing a space for further reflection.

3. To what extent, and in what ways, has Forus’ support for members enabled them to better understand and to influence their government’s implementation plans and monitoring of Agenda 2030, and on other key development issues?

The member Survey shows that 69% agree that Forus helps them to engage more effectively with the Agenda 2030 processes at national level; and 78% agree that Forus provides useful information, publications and resource tools.

In concrete terms, this can mean that Forus members gain more leverage simply through being a member of Forus. More often, the leverage is gained through the use of Forus sub-grants and supports, tools and materials, for instance to understand how Agenda 2030 works at national level, and to embody that in advocacy or monitoring activities, in shadow-reporting the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), and in mobilising national NGOs around Agenda 2030 issues.

Numerous members reported positive use of Forus resources and tools, in terms of understanding Agenda 2030 and the VNR processes, and in enabling them to interact with their governments.

4. To what extent, and in what ways, has Forus’ support for members enabled them to better understand, and engage regionally and internationally, with Agenda 2030 and other global issues?

The Survey found that almost 80% of members agree that Forus has helped them to better understand Agenda 2030; and that 69% agree that Forus support helped them to engage more effectively with Agenda 2030 at global level, but that less half agreed they helped at regional level.

Forus’ support to its members comes in different forms.

Some members used the sub-grants to attend the HLPF and received welcome technical assistance to participate in the events. Many also attended the Regional Sustainable Development Forums. Forus and its regional members helped to maximise the benefits for national members.

Regional members also secured invitations for members to regional-level events and activities, through their connections with the UN Regional Commissions, which also benefits the latter. Sub-grants also can comprise a significant proportion of regional member’s income and enable them to participate at relevant events and forums.

Peer-to-peer learning through Working Groups and Capacity Building workshops and Webinars are also greatly appreciated: 87% of members agree they are valuable for such learning, while 77% endorse the value of tools and resources for peer learning. The provision of publications, updates and other resource tools are also highly valued, with 74% of members finding them useful for advocacy needs and goals.

In this context, the level of trust that members have for Forus is notable: A total of 89% agree that Forus is a trusted source of information and guidance on Agenda 2030 implementation and monitoring.

5. How do CSO Stakeholders view Forus’ contributions to joint campaigns and policy advocacy?

Forus contributes to campaigns and advocacy at all levels, from national to global, with members as well as external CSO partners.

In general, the Survey shows that a large majority of members agree that Forus is a legitimate actor in influencing decision makers, and comments in the Survey as well as several Case Studies confirm a positive view of Forus’ contributions, specifically in cases of joint campaigns and policy advocacy. Interviews reveal that Forus is seen by regional members as an important player also at the global level, a level at which they collaborate.

External international CSO stakeholders also hold a positive view of Forus contributions. On SDG 16 and SDG 17, they are seen by several major CSOs as particularly influential, but also as participative in their approach and supporting a collective voice. Another sees them as strong in the area of the enabling environment. For some, Forus’ tight focus on just a few thematic areas is an advantage that allows them to bring more to the table.

In relation to FICS, they occupied a central position for civil society as a whole, but worked closely with numerous CSOs. They helped to open a space for them to be heard, and helped to build common positions and articulate them effectively.

Specifically in relation to collaboration and working relationships, CSOs working most closely with Forus find them to be open, helpful and supportive, and strongly engaged in and committed to the shared activities. Its commitment to working in up to four languages is seen as an inclusive element in their approach, enhancing accessibility.

6. How effective is Forus’ communication, for members and for reach targets groups?

From the Survey, 70% of members agree that Forus’ communications are effective in reaching the relevant target audience. A total of 76% believe that Forus memberships contributes to improving their visibility and recognition by international stakeholders, and two third that it has helped them to give visibility to their messages.

7. To what extent is transparency, accountability and good governance ensured in the project?

Based on a review of the governance structure, documentation and interviews, Forus is transparent and practices accountability. Its governance structures are participative and democratic, and appropriate to a network CSO organisation. The evidence points to well-functioning, transparent and accountable governance structures and practices.

8. To what extent was gender mainstreaming included in the project? If so, how?

Forus has no planned and deliberate effort to mainstream gender in the project or to monitor progress; but the overall orientation of Forus is prioritise gender in its strategy and in all its activities and campaigns.

9. To what extent was environmental mainstreaming included in the project? If so, how and to what effect?

The evidence is weak but points to efforts by Forus to mainstream environmental issues through its activities, but there is no formal plan in the context of the project or to monitor activity or impact.

10. Does the project actively contribute to the promotion of Human Rights? If so, how?

The promotion human rights is a strong underlying theme in many Forus activities, and a human rights framework is the backdrop against which they work. Yet there is no systematic acknowledgement of this, no monitoring of the impact they have, and no explicit policy.

Some General Conclusions

Forus activities can be categorised into three areas, broadly in line with the *influence* Strategy Pillar:

- 1) Engaging with governments to ensure that development policies and actions are achieving development goals, and are empowering and inclusive;
- 2) Engaging with other bodies providing development financing and resources to ensure that they are contributing to human rights, environment, development and social needs; and
- 3) Engaging with the environment in which civil society operates, to defend against and roll back unreasonable restrictions and open up new possibilities.

While the EU project being evaluated here has specific goals and indicators of success, including under other Strategic Pillars, the focus of this evaluation has been on the above areas.

Several of the indicators of the EU project were vaguely defined and therefore difficult to assess as part of this evaluation. It is noteworthy that the Forus Secretariat acknowledges that the identification of indicators, initially undertaken in 2015, that would retain relevance over a 4.5 year project was a difficult exercise. The significant investments in monitoring and evaluation made during the project, and the recruitment of staff with partial responsibility/expertise in these areas, are likely to ease similar challenges in the future.

Working with Agenda 2030

Under the first heading above, an initial conclusion is that the choice of Agenda 2030 as the framework to achieve Forus goals, and specifically the selection of SDG 16 and SDG 17 as the main target of advocacy, is the right one. It is strongly supported by a large majority of members, offers opportunities to work from national through to global levels, and having an impact is a realistic prospect.

The advocacy work at global level has been, within the chosen focus, wide ranging and of high quality, and has gained a high profile. Forus is seen as a highly legitimate actor in its own right, as effective in bringing authentic voices of civil society to the table, and as an active and trustworthy

partner for collaboration. A multiplicity of Forus publications and policy positions are taken seriously, and have been effective in gaining attention and being debated. Forus has taken the initiative and succeeded in gaining representation at high levels of influence in HLPF and beyond. Further impact could be achieved through additional advance preparation, advance promotion and refinement of content to suit different audiences, but such work would most likely require an additional commitment of resources to advocacy.

Regional level work, by Forus and Forus regional and national members, is highly effective in some regions, especially in Asia and to a degree in the Pacific, and strong relations have been developed with UN ESCAP. Several members also have close relations with UN ECLAC, and have some influence there. Other regions were not examined in depth but the evidence available suggested that they are less active in relation to Agenda 2030, with the important exception of some individual members.

Nationally, the main influence is through supporting those members that focus on Agenda 2030 in their VNRs and consultations processes, and there has been some success there. A large majority of members have also gained further knowledge on the processes through the publications, news updates, Webinars and peer interactions.

Strategic interaction between these levels, in terms of cooperation and coordination, is patchy, particularly between the national and other levels. Overall, however, the level and quality of activity and the impact is very significant, especially given the resources that are available to undertake this work.

Financing for Development

Largely through happenstance, but thanks also to a good reputation, Forus found itself with an opportunity to intervene in the financing for development issue, with the emergence of FICS hosted by its strategic partner, AFD. It grasped the opportunity with enthusiasm, and the Secretariat and Executive Committee engaged strongly with it.

Forus deployed its position on the FICS Executive Secretariat to maximise the inputs of civil society, and engaged in effective diplomacy between the different stakeholders to reinforce the human rights elements and civil society, in cooperation with other CSO network and organisations. The final Declaration was to some degree influenced through the efforts of Forus and its partners. Forus is now positioned to reinforce its work in this area.

The Environment for Civil Society

Agreed as a strategic area of work in 2018, initial steps have been taken in terms of research, developing a toolkit, and a more thorough scoping report that includes recommendations on tackling it. The Working Group is building a strategy with members.

Opportunities have been taken by Forus and its members, where they have arisen to pursue the agenda. An example is with the Danish member, working closely with the government and expanding outwards from there towards the HLPF and more widely within the UN system.

With the Agenda 2030 process, the issue of civil society participation is also pushed and Forus has gained a reputation for developing this in different forums.

A strategic approach and clear plan of action is currently emerging with the focus on the digital enabling environment and women's leadership. Forus will need to continue to identify and demonstrate its added value and unique contributions to debates and activities in these areas.

Recommendations for Forus

Several of the following recommendations are predicated on the possibility that Forus will succeed in mobilising additional finances and resources. This expectation is based on a general conclusion of this evaluation that Forus has provided very good value for money, and added-value for the agreed objectives, to the existing strategic donor partners.

1. The strategic growth, quality and success of Forus advocacy to date in Agenda 2030 merits further deepening and expansion, and additional resources should be invested there.

Rationale: In general, Forus has demonstrated a strong advocacy capacity in Agenda 2030 at global level, including building and working in partnerships, producing advocacy resources, seizing opportunities when they arise and have an influence in the appropriate forums, especially in relation to SDG 16 and SDG 17 but also in terms of the participation of civil society in for instance the HLFP. The modest budget and staff resource available for advocacy, almost all concentrated at the level of the secretariat, have yielded good results.

Forus has grown strategically over the project period, while remaining a small organisation. It has gained a good reputation at the Agenda 2030 global level. In some regions Forus and its members are also effective, though others would require additional effort and resources if Forus members are to have an effective presence.

2. Additional resources should reinforce a member-led approach to advocacy, by targeting Forus members seeking to, and potentially with the capacity to, engage more strongly in Agenda 2030, and in other development processes, especially at regional and global level.

Rationale: A key strength of Forus, recognised by international stakeholders, is that it can draw on its global member network to bring voices from national level to regional and global level arenas. This underlines the added-value of a member-led approach. However, the capacity of members themselves can limit the extent to which this is done, even where they are highly active in the Agenda 2030 at national level. Forus could consider targeting specific members, working in collaboration with their regional member, supplementing the sub-grants with capacity building and financial resources. The goal would be to enable these members to be more effective at regional and global level (and also at national level), supported closely by the Secretariat and/or regional members. This would also have the advantage of reinforcing Forus as a member-led organisation.

3. The Working Group on Enabling Environment should be promoted as a priority, including specifically the development of a coherent strategy and plan of action, and the identification of niche areas in which Forus can intervene effectively.

Rationale: Forus has already gained a reputation among international CSOs and others for good research and effective campaigning and advocacy on the issues of the enabling environment for civil society, and this will most likely continue as a growing area of concern and of action globally. Niche areas could be developed, such as the digital enabling environment (building on the success of the #UNMute campaign, and women's leadership).

4. The FICS success should be followed up vigorously in the context of the FICS 2 summit, and opportunities taken to develop closer partnerships with CSO networks and alliances active in this area.

Rationale: Forus' activities at FICS are considered positive and successful, both by the convenor AFD and by other CSO networks and alliances active there. FICS 2 offers an opportunity for Forus to deepen its experience in mobilising and supporting wider civil society around the financing for development issue, and to build strong relationship with other CSO organisations. Building on its FICS experience, and working with other partners, further opportunities should be explored in the area of financing for development in which Forus can have an effective input.

5. Forus should engage more strongly with Strategic Donor Partner liaison points to devise and implement ways to influence their approach and programmes across their organisations.

Rationale: A goal of strategic donor partner organisations, currently DG INTPA and AFD, in funding Forus is to gain further knowledge and experience from the partnership concerning issues, experience and modus operandi in working with civil society more generally. Both DG INTPA and AFD have explicitly noted that they are seeking such benefits from the partnership, and indeed have already shown their willingness to do so. Concrete examples are how AFD identified Forus as a useful partner in FICS; and how Forus successfully cooperated with INTPA and EU offices in Africa. This takes effort on the part of Forus, working very closely with the liaison points and drawing in its members, to understand the needs of different parts of the partner organisation, especially of the field/national offices and missions. But the benefits to Forus in this area are many, including strengthening the relationship with the strategic partner, building links at national level for members, and generally extending its knowledge and sphere of influence.

6. Forus should integrate communications and advocacy functions, to develop a single approach to addressing its strategic goals.

Rationale: The success of the #UNMute campaign in combining with the advocacy on civil society participant at the HLPF demonstrates how communication and advocacy reinforce each other. The #MarchWithUs campaign reaches out to many new stakeholders, who in turn may potentially become new partners and collaborators with Forus in advocacy. Forus acknowledges that such integration is needed and to be welcomed, and the process is already underway.

7. Consider establishing policies and practices for gender mainstreaming, extending also to LGBTQ+, and developing resources and tools for member. Human rights and environment mainstreaming could also be developed.

Rationale: The absence of gender, human rights and environmental mainstreaming in this project highlights the general absence of policies and practices, including gaps in Forus' monitoring as a whole. Developing those from scratch can consume considerable secretariat time, but many examples exist that could readily be adapted. Forus could also act as a resource for members in this area, and provide some support for their implementation.