INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY FOUNDATION

STRATEGY 2026-

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INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY FOUNDATION

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1 Introduction

The ISF Strategy, beginning in 2026, sets the overall direction for the organisation and clarifies the strategic choices that guide its work. It is a rolling strategy, reviewed and updated regularly to ensure continued relevance in a rapidly changing global context. The strategy builds on ISF's purpose as defined in the ISF Rules, its vision of the world and the foundation's role, the values that steer decision-making, and consistent operating principles, supported by a broad context analysis. It establishes three strategic objectives that advance ISF's vision, outlines the key approaches for implementing and monitoring strategic and programmatic goals, and sets out the organisation's risk management, accountability practices, and resource needs.

This strategy reaffirms ISF's strategic choice to focus geographically on East Africa and thematically on strengthening the rights of women and girls. This continued focus enhances ISF's impact and added value, supporting resilience and effectiveness amid global and local turbulence. In Finland, ISF has established recognised expertise particularly in the prevention of FGM. Building on this strong foundation—and acknowledging that FGM prevention alone cannot achieve lasting, transformative change—ISF will continue to integrate efforts to prevent FGM and other forms of violence against women and girls with work that promotes sustainable livelihoods, especially through green and circular economy approaches.

The development of this strategy builds on the strategic direction set by ISF's Board, ensuring continuity in long-term commitments. The strategy update process began with a context analysis to assess key trends, uncertainties and their implications for ISF's work and the wider international development sector. This analysis informed a review of the existing strategic objectives to confirm their continued relevance and identify areas requiring adjustment. The Board, Management Committee, Extended Management Committee (including Country Directors), and Senior Advisers engaged in joint workshops and discussions throughout the participatory and iterative process.

The review of the strategy took place during a period of significant global volatility in 2025. The international environment is marked by overlapping crises, including geopolitical conflict, democratic backsliding, shrinking civic space, rising inequality and accelerating climate impacts. These developments are reshaping global power relations and weakening multilateral cooperation, creating growing uncertainty for civil society actors and development partners. This context underscores the importance of resilience, adaptability and strong locally grounded approaches in ISF's work in East Africa and in Finland.

2 Mission, Vision and Values

ISF **mission** is to support development that strengthens democracy, equality, and human rights globally and challenge people to build a more equitable world.

ISF **envisions** a world where women and girls are empowered to build their own future, their self-determination is fully realised, and the right to bodily integrity respected. ISF aims to be a trusted partner in empowering women and girls in East Africa.

ISF's decision-making and action is steered by the following values:

- Solidarity. Human connection, courage, and inspiration. We take responsibility for one another and for the environment.
- Equality. Everyone has equal value and the right to a good life. We promote gender equality together with our partners and allies.
- Justice. In an increasingly unequal world, we demand equal opportunities for women and girls in the most vulnerable situations.
- Participation. We believe in the power of activism and civic engagement. We work together – as partners.

3 Context and Operating Environment

This chapter outlines the global and regional conditions shaping ISF's strategic choices at the time of the strategy review. It identifies the key political, economic, social, and environmental trends that create both constraints and enabling factors for achieving the organisation's objectives. By recognising these risks, preconditions, and emerging opportunities, the analysis provides a realistic foundation for strategy implementation and helps ensure that ISF's priorities remain relevant, achievable, and responsive in a rapidly changing world. The detailed context analysis for the countries of ISF program implementation can be found in the ISF Programme 2026-29, which is the main instrument for the implementation of the ISF strategy.

Today's political landscape is shaped by overlapping crises affecting development, peace, and security. Russia's invasion of Ukraine deepened global instability, raised nuclear tensions, and spurred militarization. At the same time, Israel's ongoing assault on Gaza and bombings across the Middle East have escalated humanitarian catastrophe, eroded international law and the authority of the UN, and intensified global polarization—with ripple effects reaching regions like East Africa. Meanwhile, shifting power dynamics are pushing the world toward a multipolar order dominated by strategic blocs and transactional politics.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) remain a central framework for global development efforts. However, progress is slowing—or reversing—as 2030 approaches. While governments and development institutions bear formal responsibility, civil society increasingly steps in to fill gaps, especially where multilateral action falters. Yet rising multipolarity and weakened global cooperation make collective progress more difficult.

Development cooperation is undergoing a profound paradigm shift. The donor-recipient model is evolving into more balanced, SDG-aligned partnerships. European actors are moving beyond colonial legacies toward more equitable, investment-driven engagement, reflecting growing calls for justice from the Global South. The climate finance is growing although most of it is given out as loans or de-risking investment mechanisms, reflecting the paradigm change from grants to loans and investments in donor country private sector potentially worsening the debt burden of many countries. This underlines the need for new debt settlement instruments and reforming of the global financial system. Meanwhile China, other BRICS countries, and domestic philanthropy are gaining ground.

The funding environment for development cooperation is simultaneously undergoing disruptive change. The phase-out of 80% of USAID programmes has directly impacted UN agencies like UNICEF and UNFPA, creating significant funding gaps for essential services supporting women and girls in fragile areas. Many European countries are diverting aid to military spending, while financing is shifting toward private-sector tools, trade-based mechanisms, and domestic revenue and strengthening domestic resource mobilization in the global South. Civil society must adapt through innovation, partnerships, and alternative funding models like blended finance and impact investing.

At the local and regional levels, a broad trend towards authoritarianism, nationalism, and populism is apparent. Democratic engagement is declining, polarisation is rising, and anti-gender movements are gaining traction, amplified by digital media and new technologies. Around the world, the space for civic engagement is narrowing. Restrictive laws, intimidation, and violence are present in over half of all countries. Despite these constraints, civil society continues to adapt and mobilise in creative ways to protect civic space and promote inclusion.

Gender equality is facing backlash worldwide. Anti-gender movements are intensifying attacks on sexual and reproductive health and rights, as well as LGBTQI+ protections, framing these efforts as resistance to so-called “gender ideology” and undermining long-established human rights norms. This global regression—combined with weakening international leadership on human rights—has contributed to a climate in which many African governments feel emboldened to deprioritize gender commitments, restrict protections for women and LGBTQI+ communities, and justify regressive policies on cultural or religious grounds. As a result, violence against women and girls, including harmful practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage, remains widespread, further limiting women’s agency and economic empowerment.

Shifts in political power are reshaping the conditions for both development and peace. Violence, displacement, and humanitarian needs are rising, while long-term development cooperation and peacebuilding are underfunded. Short-term relief dominates, risking neglect of root causes and resilience. These dynamics can create opportunities for local ownership but also threaten global norms if not managed inclusively.

The climate crisis is becoming increasingly urgent. Its impacts—displacement, food insecurity, and biodiversity loss—disproportionately affect vulnerable communities, especially women. Environmental degradation threatens not only livelihoods but also long-term ecological resilience, complicating humanitarian and development responses.

Globally, there is a growing emphasis on resource efficiency, sustainable production, and circular approaches to reduce waste and emissions. Policies in Europe, Africa, and beyond increasingly prioritize renewable energy, sustainable materials, and safe and sustainable agri-food systems. The

private sector is innovating rapidly, and digital and technological transformations are reshaping economic opportunities. These trends highlight the rising importance of circular economy approaches in development, particularly for creating inclusive and future-oriented livelihoods.

The rapid development of artificial intelligence and ongoing digital transformation are reshaping the media and communications landscape, creating both opportunities and critical challenges. While AI and digital tools enable civil society organizations to enhance outreach, improve efficiency, and innovate in areas like humanitarian aid and risk management, they also amplify disparities in digital inclusion, particularly between the Global North and South where access, affordability, and skills remain uneven. At the same time, growing dependence on global tech platforms poses strategic risks, as changing terms or restrictions from actors like Meta could undermine local fundraising, audience engagement, and communication efforts. These shifts raise pressing ethical concerns regarding privacy, data security, environmental impacts, and the responsible use of AI.

These global trends described above impact directly ISF and its partners work in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somaliland in many ways. Reductions in development funding, including major cuts to USAID support, cannot be offset by private investments or new financial instruments. This has led to the deterioration of critical public services, such as health care and education. At the same time, the impacts of climate change increase regional vulnerability, contributing to both internal and cross-border displacement, instability, and localized conflicts. The most vulnerable groups—including women, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities—are disproportionately affected. An intersectional lens is needed to establish how overlapping inequalities—such as gender, class, age, and disability—compound these vulnerabilities, shaping who is most exposed to risk and who has the least access to resources.

The global context influences also the ISF immediate operating environment in Finland as well. The Finnish development sector is facing growing challenges as competition for funding intensifies. Many public and private resources have already been reduced, and NGOs now operate in a tighter funding environment. Cuts to development spending—both from multilateral organizations and bilateral country programs—have already impacted the sector, limiting the scope and predictability of available support. While Finland has historically maintained positive public and governmental attitudes toward development cooperation, there is increasing uncertainty about the continuity of this support, particularly considering future government changes, rising domestic security priorities, and economic pressures. Public opinion, though generally favorable, could shift if development cooperation is framed as less urgent compared to national or global crises. This context also underscores the growing importance of communication work—particularly efforts to advance a more positive, realistic Africa narrative—in maintaining informed public debate and support for global cooperation.

Rising military expenditures and a stronger focus on national security further strain available resources for development programs. Although civic space in Finland remains relatively open, the combination of funding cuts, growing political scrutiny, and increased competition among NGOs risks reducing operational flexibility and long-term impact. In this context, NGOs must navigate a more constrained environment, where strategic planning, diversified funding, and careful prioritization of activities are no longer optional but essential for survival.

4 ISF's operating principles and value added

ISF's operating principles define the ethical framework that guides the organisation's work. They set out what ISF strives to achieve, how it conducts its activities, and the values it upholds across all contexts.

ISF's operating model is grounded in the Human Rights–Based Approach (HRBA), guided by the core human rights principles of universality, equality and non-discrimination, participation and inclusion, accountability, and transparency. The do no harm principle establishes the minimum standard for HRBA implementation, requiring ISF to recognise potential harms or risks arising from its interventions and to develop measures to prevent or mitigate them.

A second cornerstone of ISF's operating model is its commitment to long-term equal partnerships with local civil society actors, including NGOs, community-based organisations, and women-led enterprises. These partnerships are built on mutual trust, transparency, and shared ownership of goals. ISF recognises partners as equal actors with their own expertise, leadership, and agency, and positions itself in a supportive rather than directive role.

Strengthening civil society is seen both as a human rights objective and as a critical pathway to broader systemic change. Civil society actors represent rights-holders, amplify community voices, and hold duty-bearers accountable when obligations are unmet. By supporting their leadership and capacity, ISF helps to enhance rights-holders' ability to claim their rights and contributes to locally driven, sustainable, and transformative change.

ISF brings a distinct added value through its combined expertise in preventing violence against women and girls and advancing women's economic empowerment. Few organisations work at the intersection of bodily autonomy and economic resilience, yet ISF's experience demonstrates that these dimensions are inseparable in women's lives. This dual focus is informed by long-term, practice-based learning with local partners as well as continuous engagement with global research, comparative evidence, and policy analysis. As a result, ISF is uniquely positioned to identify how harmful gender norms, economic dependencies, and structural barriers reinforce one another—and to co-develop integrated approaches that address these dynamics holistically. Methodologically, ISF's commitment to localisation ensures that solutions emerge from local knowledge, leadership, and lived experience, while being strengthened by rigorous analysis and global expertise. This combination of grounded practice, thematic depth, and evidence-driven integration enables ISF to design and support interventions that are context-sensitive, scalable, and transformative for women and girls.

ISF provides added value to local civil society partners—especially locally led and women-driven organizations—by offering complementary support that strengthens their leadership, voice, and long-term sustainability. As an interpreter, ISF translates and contextualises international policies, frameworks, and guidance so they become relevant and usable in local settings. As a knowledge broker and producer, ISF connects global insights with local realities and co-creates new knowledge that enhances evidence-based programming and advocacy. Acting as a co-learner and coach, ISF

works alongside partners to build skills through mutual learning rather than top-down capacity transfer. ISF also serves as a convenor, facilitating safe, inclusive spaces where local actors can strategize, learn, and collaborate on their own terms. As a connector and ecosystem builder, ISF bridges local actors with wider networks, enabling partnerships, exchanges, and opportunities that would otherwise be out of reach. ISF further acts as an advocate and amplifier, helping local partners gain access to decision-makers and ensuring their achievements receive visibility and credit. As a critical friend, ISF provides trusted, non-directive support—offering reflection, guidance, and constructive challenge when invited, without imposing external agendas.

ISF brings value to actors in the broader development and innovation ecosystem by serving as a trusted channel to locally driven expertise, realities, and innovations. Through its long-standing partnerships and deep contextual understanding, ISF offers donors and international organisations a grounded perspective that helps ensure policies, funding modalities, and programmes are relevant, rights-based, and responsive to community priorities. By acting as a knowledge broker, ISF contributes practice-based insights that enrich research, policy dialogues, and innovation processes. As a convenor and ecosystem builder, ISF connects research institutions, private-sector innovators, and global networks with local actors and solutions, enabling co-creation, piloting, and responsible scaling. For funders and institutional partners, ISF acts as a credible, transparent, and accountable partner who can translate strategic intentions into practical, locally owned action while promoting localisation, equitable partnerships, and feminist development principles. Through its advocacy and communications, ISF helps these actors better understand the needs and strengths of women-led and community-based organisations, contributing to more inclusive, effective, and impactful development investments. Finally, ISF is not only strengthening civil societies in the Global South but also aims to be a leading expert driving change and providing ways for the Finnish public to support women and girls globally.

5 Strategic Objectives

ISF continues to implement its mission (development that strengthens democracy, equality, and human rights globally and challenge people to build a more equitable world) by empowering women and girls. Through continued geographical focus on East Africa and thematical focus on women's bodily integrity and economic rights, ISF strengthens its impact and added value, as well as its ability to succeed amid changes in both the global and local operating environments.

Prevention of violence against women and girls (VAWG) and women's economic empowerment are fundamentally interconnected, as control over resources and control over one's body are inseparable. Addressing only one dimension overlooks how these forms of power influence every aspect of women's lives. Therefore, while strengthening its expertise in preventing female genital mutilation (FGM) and advancing circular-economy solutions, ISF recognises the necessity of broader VAWG-prevention and livelihood approaches in its work. ISF invests in identifying contextual, practical, and effective ways to integrate these areas so that women and girls can exercise their rights, agency, and potential.

This approach is further reinforced by ISF's commitment to localisation—working with and through local partners and changemakers—to ensure sustainable, community-driven solutions and deeper, long-term impact.

In addition to two strategic objectives related to VAWG and women's livelihoods, ISF continues strategic efforts to be financially stable and resilient organisation. This chapter outlines the three strategic objectives that contribute to ISF's vision, justifications for the selection, and key activities to achieve them.

Strategic Objective 1

Local change agents lead action to address violence against women and girls, in particular female genital mutilation.

Why it matters

The right to bodily integrity is one of the most profound human rights. Constraints on women and girls' bodily integrity include violence, abuse, and harassment. Globally, 30 per cent of women aged 15 and older have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, or both at least once in their life. This figure has remained largely unchanged in the last two decades. 20 per cent of young women aged 20–24 was first married or in a union before age 18, and despite global efforts to eliminate female genital mutilation, 4 million girls undergo the practice each year. Women in countries classified as lowest-income, conflict-affected, and climate-vulnerable settings are disproportionately affected by gender-based violence and harmful practices.

While violence, abuse, and harassment impede women's bodily integrity, they also undermine women's educational and employment opportunities, income-earning capability, and advancement in the workplace. Shame and silence, coupled with the social norms and expectations affect family dynamics, restricting women's use of time and freedom to move outside the home. As a result, women are often excluded from decision making, their access to resources is poor and they rarely participate in joint planning and development schemes.

Of the various forms of VAWG, ISF builds special expertise in prevention of FGM, which is a severe violation against bodily integrity and self-determination and entails many physical, psychological and social problems. FGM sustains and is sustained by other patriarchal, discriminating and harmful practices. It represents a tradition often assumed to be mandated by ethnicity or religion and linked to understandings of honor and purity. Women's socio-economic subordination upholds their dependency upon marriage and, thereby, FGM—often perceived as a prerequisite to marriage. Child marriages, which often follow FGM, further limit women's possibilities to educate themselves and participate in working life. Furthermore, in the male-dominated political sphere, the reluctance to intervene in FGM through legislation and policy contributes to the perpetuation of the practice.

How we promote it

This strategic objective is advanced through programmatic action, partnership development, knowledge building, and advocacy:

- Prioritising operational contexts with high FGM prevalence and viable local anti-FGM actors
- Strengthening expertise and establishing coherent, harmonised cross-country methods across the ISF programme for preventing FGM, ensuring that these shared approaches also generate new knowledge and data on the effectiveness of VAWG-prevention strategies
- Linking FGM prevention to other forms of VAWG, including child marriage, sexual violence, and partner violence, and into women's livelihood initiatives, ensuring that economic programming reinforces shifts in gender norms and bodily autonomy.
- Strengthening local partner capacity to design, pilot, and scale innovative, community-driven VAWG prevention initiatives.
- Cooperating with key actors and networks in the Global South and North, including research institutions, to enable knowledge exchange, innovation, and synergies.
- Emphasizing FGM in communications, advocacy, and private fundraising—particularly in Finnish context

Strategic Objective 2

Local stakeholders drive green-economy solutions, with a particular focus on circular-economy innovations that expand women's livelihood opportunities.

Why it matters

Advancing women's economic empowerment through green and circular-economy solutions supports future-oriented, sustainable, and inclusive livelihoods. A green economy—low-carbon, resource-efficient, and socially equitable—values natural resources and ecosystems while promoting human well-being. By transitioning from wasteful, inequality-generating models to sustainable, resilient systems, women gain access to opportunities in emerging sectors, contributing to both local prosperity and environmental sustainability. Within this, circular economy provides concrete entry points by offering cost-effective and locally available raw materials, reducing reliance on imports, increasing profitability in agriculture and small enterprises, enabling locally produced renewable energy, and significantly lowering waste, emissions, and pressure on natural resources. By keeping materials and products in circulation—through reuse, repair, remanufacturing, recycling, and composting—circularity accelerates the transition toward resilient, climate-responsible local economies. Through a value chain approach, ISF can work with different stakeholders from cooperatives, companies, research institutes, financiers to government authorities and identify strategic entry points across processes.

The shift to a green and circular economy is also a major gender-equality opportunity. Across East Africa, governments—including Kenya and Ethiopia—are advancing national green-growth and circular-economy strategies that open pathways for women to engage in emerging sectors such as renewable energy, waste valorisation, sustainable materials, eco-agriculture, and digital green innovation. At the same time, Finland and the EU are placing growing emphasis on the green and circular economy in development policy, innovation cooperation, and climate finance. These global and regional trends underline the urgency of supporting women to access and benefit from evolving green-economy markets and technologies, ensuring they are not left behind in economic, technological and environmental transitions.

How we promote it

This strategic objective is advanced through programmatic action, partnership development, knowledge building, and advocacy:

- Prioritising operational contexts where green-economy potential—especially circular-economy opportunities—is strong, locally relevant, and aligned with national strategies.
- Building thematic expertise in circular-economy solutions linked to women's livelihoods—such as waste valorisation, renewable energy, sustainable agricultural inputs, digital tools, and inclusive business models.
- Strengthening local partner capacity to design, pilot, and scale green- and circular-economy initiatives that are women-led and grounded in local knowledge.
- Cooperating with key actors in the Global South and North, including research institutions, private-sector innovators, national green-growth and circular-economy platforms, and Finnish/EU networks to enable knowledge exchange, innovation, and market linkages.
- Embedding green and circular-economy themes in communications, advocacy, and private fundraising—particularly in Finland—to highlight their potential for gender-responsive and climate-smart development.

Strategic Objective 3

ISF is a financially stable and resilient organization. Its goal is to ensure a diverse and sustainable funding base by strengthening international and institutional fundraising while safeguarding steady domestic income.

Why it matters

In the current volatile and rapidly changing context, financial stability and resilience mean that ISF can maintain continuity while strengthening international networks, diversifying its funding base, and being ready to operate in increasingly partnership-driven and competitive funding environments. Financial resilience is supported by responsible cost management, ensuring that resources are used efficiently and in alignment with ISF's values and strategic priorities. Sustainable impact depends on collaboration, credibility, and the ability to anticipate change.

ISF's financial foundation is built on MFA program support and international donor partnerships, supported by steady private fundraising; together these provide scale, continuity, and the flexibility needed to act quickly and uphold ISF's mission.

International institutional fundraising is becoming increasingly competitive, but it is also central to reducing dependency on any single donor. Strengthening ISF's visibility, expert profile, and participation in equitable consortia and alliances is therefore key to accessing multi-year funding that aligns with its thematic focus.

Private fundraising remains vital for financial stability, adaptability, and credibility, and is essential in meeting the self-financing requirements attached to MFA support and future institutional funding. While significant growth in private income is not realistic under current conditions, safeguarding this base is critical.

How we promote it

This strategic objective is advanced through investing in both private and institutional fundraising via four-year development plans and efficient and transparent resource management:

Further development of a four-year plan for institutional fundraising, including

- Systematically broadening the overall institutional funding base by developing long-term relationships with donors, networks, and fund managers, while nurturing the key partnership with the Finnish MFA.
- Monitoring shifts in the funding landscape and the development of national and regional programmes, including improving understanding of research and blended-finance donors and instruments and improving internal agility, enabling faster responses to funding calls and partnership opportunities
- Positioning ISF as an expert and credible consortium partner through clear communication and evidence of impact and building and joining international consortiums with like-minded organisations that complement ISF work both thematically and geographically to access larger, multi-stakeholder funding opportunities.
- Exploring strategic corporate partnerships aligned with international program themes

Through the development of a four-year private fundraising plan

- Systematically build and strengthen private fundraising capacity by continuously learning and optimising marketing for identified target donor segments, cultivating relationships, diversifying revenue streams, and setting measurable growth objectives.
- As a key element of the plan, maintain and strengthen the monthly donor fundraising to secure a stable and predictable income base, focusing on retention, donor care, and targeted recruitment that sustains current levels and enables stable growth of monthly giving over the strategy period.

Resource management

- Practicing responsible and transparent cost management across all operations, ensuring value for money and prioritizing expenditure that directly supports programmatic impact and organizational sustainability.
- Maintaining cost-discipline and regularly reviewing cost structures to ensure efficient use of resources while upholding quality standards and staff well-being.

6 Approaches to Implementation

The following approaches describe how ISF delivers its work in practice and achieves its strategic objectives. They represent the methods and ways of working through which change is supported and sustained, from partnership-building to learning, advocacy and innovation. These approaches are practical and adaptive**:** they guide strategy implementation but are also reviewed and refined over time, as contexts evolve, and evidence grows. Together, they ensure that ISF's work is grounded in local leadership, informed by experience and research, and focused on creating long-term, community-driven impact.

Strengthening Change Through Collective Action

ISF advances change through collective action grounded in long-term, equitable collaboration with locally led civil society organisations and movements. This approach prioritises local leadership, organisational strengthening, and shared decision-making, ensuring that solutions are rooted in community ownership. Women-led CSOs are at the centre of this work: they lead advocacy, shape programming, and mobilise communities to drive lasting change. By strengthening their leadership and institutional capacity, ISF supports them to influence policy, prevent VAWG—particularly FGM—and advance sustainable livelihoods. ISF also fosters wider collective action by facilitating collaboration across networks and alliances at local, national, and regional levels, and by linking partners with donors, international organisations, research institutions, universities, and the private sector. Through these interconnected efforts, local initiatives gain access to broader resources, knowledge, and policy spaces, increasing their reach, resilience, and long-term impact.

Advocacy and Policy Dialogue

In ISF analysis legal, social and moral norms, and attitudes that perpetuate discrimination act as a significant barrier to the realization of the rights and participation of women and girls in vulnerable countries. These are deeply rooted in culture and society, in roles and, above all, in power structures, and challenging them requires the active involvement of both women and men. ISF and its partners engage in targeted advocacy and policy dialogue to shift social norms, improve legal and policy frameworks, and ensure the rights and safety of women and girls. Advocacy is grounded in local realities and informed by evidence generated from community-level work. ISF plays a convening and enabling role, supporting partners to access decision-making spaces, articulate shared priorities, and influence institutions and power structures that shape women's bodily autonomy and economic participation.

Multi-voiced communications

Communication is a core driver of change and organisational resilience for ISF. ISF's communications approach is community-centered, participatory and multi-voiced, fostering inclusion, dialogue and shared understanding across diverse actors. It is explicitly and actively anti-

racist, ensuring that communication practices challenge discriminatory structures and promote equity in both representation and messaging. Internally, communication strengthens cohesion, shared purpose and a learning culture. Externally, it supports programme objectives by amplifying local voices, shifting harmful narratives, and promoting understanding of sensitive issues such as FGM and other forms of violence against women and girls. ISF will continue the work to transform how stories and imagery about partner communities are represented, ensuring dignity, agency and authenticity. At the same time, strategic and targeted communication will play a key role in resource mobilisation and brand positioning, engaging supporters, donors, peer organisations, private sector and other stakeholders.

Learning and Adaptation

ISF is committed to strengthening its capacity for renewal and adaptability. Learning is understood as a strategic organisational capability: the ability to reflect, adjust and evolve in response to changing contexts and emerging insights. ISF will cultivate a strong, attractive organisational culture that encourages curiosity, shared reflection, and responsible experimentation—including learning from setbacks as well as successes. Clear strategic direction and empowering leadership will enable staff and partners to take initiative, navigate uncertainty, and develop new approaches. By embedding systematic learning and evidence use across the organisation and its partnerships, ISF ensures that its work remains relevant, locally grounded and continuously improving.

Innovation and Evidence-Based Practice

ISF promotes innovation to strengthen the effectiveness and sustainability of interventions, preventing VAWG, particularly FGM are linked with women's livelihoods and economic opportunities. ISF Innovation is grounded in community knowledge and practice while benefiting from strategic collaboration with universities, research institutions, and private-sector actors who bring complementary expertise, technology and market access. Together with partners, ISF identifies, tests and refines promising approaches such as community-rooted end-FGM models, and integrated strategies that link violence prevention with women's economic empowerment. This includes work to promote women's livelihoods in the circular economy, strengthen women's participation in the formal economy, and advance gender-responsive climate solutions in rural contexts. ISF supports partners to document outcomes, generate evidence and share learning, enabling successful approaches to be scaled, replicated and used to influence broader systems and policy change.

7 Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting

The implementation of ISF's strategy is guided by Results-Based Management (RBM). RBM strengthens accountability, sharpens learning, and ensures that strategic decisions are grounded in evidence. It requires systematic and regular monitoring and reflection on progress toward strategic objectives.

At the operational level, the Extended Management Committee reviews the strategic action plans twice a year, assessing progress, identifying bottlenecks, and determining where adaptation is required. Each year, as part of the annual reporting cycle, data for the agreed strategic indicators (see table below) is collected, analysed, and compiled for the Board.

The Board conducts periodic reviews to assess both progress toward the strategic objectives and the ongoing relevance of the strategy in a changing context. These reviews include updated context analysis and reflection on ISF's approaches to ensure they remain effective and aligned with mission and values. Based on these assessments, the Board may introduce strategic adjustments to strengthen implementation and maintain focus on long-term objectives.

The table below outlines what the strategy aims to achieve, the information required to track results, and the methods, timelines, and responsibilities for data collection. A separate indicator tracking system is maintained to organise baseline and follow-up data and to support systematic learning across the organisation.

Strategic objectives	Indicators	Means of verification
Objective 1: Local change agents lead action to address violence against women and girls, in particular female genital mutilation. **Objective 2**: Local stakeholders drive green-economy solutions, with a particular focus on circular-economy innovations that expand women's livelihood opportunities	Scalable, community-driven EVAWG solutions piloted in ISF's programme	ISF EVAWG Adviser annual reporting
	Green-economy solutions piloted in ISF's programme	ISF Livelihood Adviser annual reporting
	Brand awareness among broad audience (%)	Hyvänkeväisyystutkimus survey
Objective 3: ISF is a financially stable and resilient organization. Its goal is to ensure a diverse and sustainable funding base by strengthening international and institutional fundraising while safeguarding steady domestic income.	Non-MFA institutional funding / total revenue (%)	ISF Finance-Administration Director annual reporting
	Concrete consortium or network building outcomes (new partnerships, concepts, co-funded projects etc.)	ISF Country Directors and Senior Advisers annual reporting
	Private fundraising annual gross income (€)	ISF Finance-Administration Director annual reporting
	Private fundraising expenses/funding (%)	ISF Finance-Administration Director annual reporting

8 Risk Management and Accountability

ISF has chosen to work in fragile and rapidly changing contexts and therefore accepts a degree of strategic risk inherent in supporting smaller and emerging women-led organisations and movements. This choice is deliberate and shapes the organisation's risk tolerance and response strategies.

To manage and anticipate risks that might influence the implementation of this strategy and its strategic objectives, ISF applies a systematic, organisation-wide risk management approach that integrates risk considerations directly into strategic decision-making. Risks are identified, assessed and prioritised across all areas of work, with clear mitigation and contingency plans guiding implementation.

Risk response measures include for example strengthening financial and administrative systems, providing capacity support to partners, improving forecasting tools, and developing scenario-based planning to anticipate shifts in the external funding and operating environment. The risk register and mitigation plans are reviewed annually and monitored biannually, ensuring continuous oversight and the ability to adapt when contexts change.

Accountability is embedded in both internal management and external relationships. Upward accountability is ensured through transparent reporting, financial integrity, compliance with donor requirements, and clear evidence of results. Downward accountability is advanced by strengthening the governance and leadership of partner organisations, enabling community participation and feedback, and ensuring that all interventions are rooted in local priorities and rights-based principles. Together, these practices reinforce organisational resilience, safeguard reputation, and enable ISF to act responsibly, effectively and sustainably while remaining committed to transformative changes in challenging environments.

9 People and Financial Management

ISF will strengthen its human resource management to ensure a professionally developing, strategically aligned, and well-being staff committed to advancing ISF's mission as part of a strong, collaborative work community. HR planning will be enhanced so that staffing levels and competencies align with strategic goals, ensuring ISF has the right people, skills, and capacities to deliver on the strategy. Leadership and organisational culture will promote collaboration, dialogue, and adaptability, while operating practices and digital services are developed to respond to changing strategic and contextual needs.

In the new strategy period, ISF aims to strengthen its attractive and inspiring organisational culture that encourages learning through experimentation—including learning from failure. Renewal requires proactive leadership that fosters curiosity, adaptability, and continuous learning, while also listening, mentoring, and coaching staff to grow and succeed. Clear objectives will support employees in

leading their own work and taking initiative, with strong emphasis placed on well-being and a sense of belonging.

ISF will continue strengthening its expert profile and thematic competencies, particularly in FGM prevention and circular economy, working closely with selected local partners whose specialised knowledge enhances collective impact and learning.

ISF will also strengthen its financial management to support effective, transparent, and accountable operations across headquarters, country offices in East Africa, and partner organisations. This includes optimising financial management systems to improve budgeting, planning, reporting, and forecasting. Harmonised financial processes, the development and adoption of financial and administrative manuals, and the integration of audit findings will promote consistency, compliance, and continuous improvement. Key priorities include enhancing financial planning and forecasting tools, building internal financial capacity, maintaining robust internal controls, and ensuring compliance with sanctions and anti–money laundering requirements. These measures will reinforce ISF's resilience and capacity to implement its strategic objectives efficiently.