

A Systematic Approach to GEDSI

Discussion Paper and Recommendations to DFAT

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A greater focus on inequalities is an opportunity for DFAT to strengthen the efficiency and effectiveness of the Australian aid program, so that it delivers better development results for all. It is also a significant leadership opportunity: globally, the growing ambition to address inequalities has so far outpaced practical tools for realising that ambition.

This paper sets out the key considerations in adopting that focus and identifies the practical next steps that DFAT, together with the sector, needs to make to better address inequalities in our work.

Background

Poverty and inequality are underpinned by unequal power relations. As development and humanitarian agencies, we have long recognised this simple fact, but have been much slower to act on its main implications: first, that social change is as important as economic growth in addressing poverty and inequality. Second, if we are to succeed, we must hand more power to the people we are working with; it is their lives we are trying to change and they cannot be seen as “beneficiaries”.

These insights have driven the recent proliferation of political commitments to a greater focus on addressing inequalities. Most prominently, the 2030 Agenda commits governments to “leaving no one behind”. These commitments are increasingly flowing through to binding standards at both global level (such as the Core Humanitarian Standards) and in the Australian sector (such as the ACFID Code of Conduct). The COVID-19 pandemic has only heightened this imperative: emerging evidence suggests that not only has the pandemic exacerbated inequalities, inequalities exacerbated the pandemic.¹

The Australian Government’s Partnerships for Recovery is grounded in an emphasis on equity: not just growth, but “inclusive and equitable growth”. At investment level, many DFAT programmes have adopted a Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) or Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) approach, although this trend appears to have preceded the development of a coordinated and systemic approach across the Department. This paper adopts the term GEDSI but the term is less important than the content of the approach.

¹ <https://feature.undp.org/coronavirus-vs-inequality/>,
[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600\(20\)30308-8/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600(20)30308-8/fulltext),
[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667\(20\)30085-2/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(20)30085-2/fulltext)

A GEDSI Approach: Challenges Ahead

Given the current context for DFAT and the Australian aid sector, the way forward needs to navigate three key considerations.

First, it is clear that social inclusion must address the inequality and disempowerment experienced by many groups - such as First Nations People, people of diverse Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression and Sexual Characteristics (SOGIESC), children, youth and older people, culturally and linguistically diverse people and ethnic minorities. In a context of shrinking ODA budgets and declining staff numbers, it is infeasible to extend the approach DFAT has taken to gender equality and disability inclusion to other aspects of inclusion. Nor is that approach perfect: despite DFAT's own commitment to these issues, and significant programming achievements, its reporting demonstrates challenges in systematically implementing these commitments across investments.² Additionally, the current approach deals poorly with the diversity of experience within groups, and the intersections between them.

Second, any reform carries the risk of going backwards. Many GEDSI strategies focus on gender equality but neglect other aspects of inclusion. Instead, the Australian aid sector needs a systematic approach to GEDSI that builds on our significant collective experience and preserves the gains made already - while addressing the limitations of past approaches.

Third, examples of well established and evaluated GEDSI approaches within bilateral and multilateral development agencies are difficult to find. Models of practice will likely need to be developed, drawing on the strong body of established practice in fields such as gender equality. This situation presents a significant opportunity for Australian leadership, given the number of development and humanitarian actors struggling to find practical solutions to this problem. Australia's standing as a leader in relation to disability inclusive development and strong track record with gender equality approaches provide a strong platform from which to pioneer this.

The scope of a GEDSI approach

Too often, a GEDSI approach is reduced to a list of groups, without deeper analysis of the root causes of inequalities, particularly unequal power relations, systemic economic inequality and social norms. Frequently, this list is accompanied by siloed approaches where separate policies, processes and resources are in place for different identity groups. The "list approach" is a prominent enough issue to warrant specific discussion here.

To put it simply: for many reasons, the "list approach" does not work. It deters staff, by reinforcing the perception that inclusion is a series of burdensome add-ons. It discourages attention to the intersecting nature of different forms of exclusion. It undermines the importance of contextual analysis. Yet the list itself is never complete.

The below principles, if applied well, should serve as an alternative to the "list approach". If programming is informed by a thorough contextual analysis of gender and power, supported by

² <https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/development/performance-of-australian-aid-2018-19>

technical expertise and lived experience, then the relevant aspects of exclusion will become apparent. That said, two important caveats are necessary:

- Certain forms of inequality exist everywhere and must always be addressed by development and humanitarian programmes, even if they look different in different places, such as gender, age, disability, and diverse SOGIESC.
- At implementation level, there is no such thing as a “generic” approach to inclusion. Delivering training for farmers in a local minority language is not the same thing as providing wheelchair access to the training centre. Different groups of people experience specific barriers to inclusion and action to address those barriers must be resourced - otherwise, donors must accept the effectiveness of their investments will be lessened.

Principles of a systematic GEDSI approach

- **Inclusion as a core goal of development:** all programming is intended to reach people and therefore should be intended to address inequalities. Programmes that do not address inequalities in their design and theory of change are unlikely to be successful in the long term and may inadvertently cause harm.
- **Power analysis:** programme design and implementation should be grounded in contextual analysis of gender and power relations, which draws on technical expertise, research and - crucially - lived experience. Approaches should be adaptive and iterative in response to monitoring, evaluation and learning.
- **Meaningful participation and representation:** people are the experts on their own lives and must be consulted on development policy and programming decisions, through their representative organisations and directly. Consultation can happen at many levels and in many ways, but it must be genuine, meaningful, reciprocal and systematic.
- **Do no harm:** a “do no harm” approach addresses the risks inherent in development programming. Marginalisation and stigma are often accompanied by backlash and violence, considerations that can only be navigated through careful and well-designed programming. This includes the risk of “doing nothing”. In reality, if a programme does not address prevailing inequalities in a community, it is likely reinforcing them - for example, a design team that only consults male leaders risks exacerbating gender inequalities.
- **Intersectionality:** inequalities cannot be treated separately, as they are linked and often compounding. For example, it is difficult to address violence against women with disabilities without understanding how disability affects gendered social roles. Addressing intersectionality is not always straightforward. For example, representative organisations themselves are sometimes organised in ways that do not bring intersectionality to the fore. This paper cannot do justice to the discussions about intersectionality - but any successful GEDSI approach will have to come to grips with intersectionality and its implications.

- **A whole of organisation approach:** unless inclusion is deeply and systematically embedded into an organisation's culture, structure and the attitudes of its staff, it is likely to remain a policy aspiration. A systematic GEDSI approach must therefore address how DFAT itself will address and incorporate these principles throughout its internal policies and systems, in particular ensuring DFAT staff and partners are accountable.
- **Accessibility:** practical access is a crucial enabler of participation in programming. If a training venue only has stairs or if a women's employment programme does not account for childcare, then none of the above will be achieved. Accessibility, however, is not an accident: it must always be planned for and resourced.

Enabling a systematic approach to GEDSI in the Australian aid program

This section identifies the practical enablers of a GEDSI approach - the elements that need to be in place at an *organisational* level. Importantly, these are different to the *programmatic* enablers of a GEDSI approach. If DFAT is to develop a systematic approach to inclusion, further consultation and expertise will need to be sought to both expand the below, and to examine what programmatic elements this approach requires.

- **Accountability:** accountability for a GEDSI approach must be clear, both for DFAT and for its partners (via levers such as accreditation and procurement). This means clear goals and targets and clarity on who is responsible for ensuring their achievement. For example, financial delegates should be accountable for not signing off on investments that do not address GEDSI to the expected standard.
- **Aid programming requirements:** it is essential that GEDSI be rigorously and systematically embedded as a mandatory component of all core aid management processes including design, procurement, agreement management, performance reporting and evaluation. Supplementary technical guidance may be required, but GEDSI-related aid management processes should not be separated from core aid management. This mandatory approach requires nuance, particularly while the detail of a systematic GEDSI approach is still being established and technical capacity remains uneven across the Department.
- **Training and capacity building for DFAT staff:** staff managing aid investments must be trained in how to ensure a GEDSI approach is applied. The role of capacity building for DFAT staff is not just to build technical understanding of GEDSI issues. It is also to change attitudes - a key enabler for ensuring that DFAT staff share the organisation's commitment to a GEDSI approach and are equipped to communicate that commitment onwards to partners.
- **Access to adequate and appropriate specialist expertise:** an overarching systematic approach to GEDSI does not detract from the need and value of specialist expertise for different people, groups and aspects of inclusion. Technical expertise - including expertise based on lived experience - is still required within the broader systematic

framework. The volume of aid programming that DFAT administers means that it will inevitably need to access technical expertise externally - noting that at present, it is unlikely that any single expert could cover off on the full breadth of a GEDSI approach as set out in this paper. Importantly, however, expertise cannot be entirely outsourced. Alongside training for investment managers, DFAT needs to maintain and likely expand in-house expertise in gender equality, child rights, disability inclusion, Indigenous justice, SOGIESC inclusion, and other areas of inclusion to ensure internal decisions are technically informed and provide adequate oversight of external specialist advice.

- **Resourcing:** it is clear that the enablers set out above have resourcing implications, for both departmental and aid budgets. It would not be sensible to attempt to estimate the exact cost here. However, two issues are worth noting in relation to resourcing:
 - As noted above, the existing evidence and programming base for a systematic GEDSI approach is thin. An initial investment is required to define what GEDSI looks like and develop the technical resources and workforce. This is discussed further in the next section.
 - As noted above, there are few if any examples of a gold standard GEDSI approach. If DFAT is successful in embedding a GEDSI approach into its investments, particularly at design stage, then the exact cost implications for programme budgets will become clearer - and, over time, it would be part of the organisation's business as usual to factor in those cost implications.
- **Organisational commitment:** a statement of policy commitment would be an essential basis for ensuring leadership and staff commitment - and in, the case of DFAT, an important means of influencing DFAT's partners and the sector. In line with the principle of a whole-of-organisation approach, the scope of that commitment must encompass not just the aid program, but DFAT's own internal culture and practices. The Department's forthcoming Diversity and Inclusion Strategy should be leveraged to support a systematic GEDSI approach.

Recommendations

A systematic GEDSI approach is not a pathway to cost reductions and it should not be seen as such. Rather, it is a long-term investment in development effectiveness - and an opportunity for Australia to lead the way in developing an innovative solution to a problem that many development and humanitarian actors are grappling with globally.

The following actions would provide a strong foundation for establishing a systematic GEDSI approach for both DFAT and the Australian aid sector. Australian development agencies are ready and able to collaborate with DFAT throughout this process.

At present, DFAT has greater experience in gender equality and disability inclusion than it does in areas like SOGIESC inclusion. This disparity will need to be considered, both in terms of where efforts are focused and how high expectations are set.

1. **Commit to a GEDSI approach.**

The sector is looking to DFAT to **make a policy commitment to GEDSI** as an approach that focuses on addressing the drivers of inequality as an essential part of achieving development outcomes, in line with the principles set out in this paper.

This should not supplant existing commitments to gender, disability and Indigenous issues - it would strengthen and complement them. It would likely need to be a high level commitment that can be made while the work set out in recommendation 2 is underway.

2. **Build the technical foundations of a systematic GEDSI approach.**

GEDSI is still emerging as a development framework: to our knowledge, there are no existing large donors that have any comprehensive, research-based framework to implement a systematic GEDSI approach. DFAT should continue its reputation as a world leader in relation to gender equality and disability inclusive development, by pioneering the building of a **coherent conceptual framework of a systematic GEDSI approach**, and **designing the tools to guide implementation**. Close and trusting collaboration with DFAT's partners would be essential in this exercise. It would also require upfront investment to establish conceptual and technical foundations, via a comprehensive review of existing practice and evidence, and thorough consultations with the range of relevant stakeholders including representative organisations. This work would also be the start of building a strong evidence base, which over time would enable demonstration of improved development outcomes through GEDSI approaches, and provide a strong ongoing knowledge base of good and evolving practice.

This framework must include **mechanisms to ensure DFAT and its partners are genuinely accountable for addressing GEDSI**. DFAT has many levers for ensuring accountability for both its staff and its partners, which it uses to address risks such as fraud, counter-terrorism and child protection. While DFAT's mechanisms for implementing and reporting on its gender equality and disability inclusion policies have many strengths, their shortcomings are also clear. These lessons should feed into future accountability mechanisms in relation to GEDSI. At a minimum, accountability should include transparent reporting and clear targets.

3. **Maintain and expand specialist expertise.**

At a minimum, DFAT must retain its existing in-house expertise in gender equality, disability inclusion, SOGIESC inclusion and Indigenous inclusion. Over time, that staffing envelope will likely need to be grown to meet increased demand for advice. Although it can be supplemented by access to high quality external expertise, it is critical that adequate internal expertise exists to oversee and coordinate external inputs - and to guide implementation of DFAT's GEDSI approach.

This paper has been prepared by a working group of practitioners specialising in GEDSI - related areas, including Maven - Scope Global, Anu Mundkur (consultant), Di Kilsby (consultant), World Vision, International Women's Development Agency, Edge Effect, Save the Children, CBM Australia (co-facilitator) and the Australian Disability and Development Consortium (co-facilitator).

This has involved a consultation process with the international development sector through the Australian Council for International Development.

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