



Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in Market Systems Development: How technical approaches have evolved (Part 1)

This level-setting summary is intended for development practitioners, implementing partners, and funders participating in the Global Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) in Market Systems Development (MSD) Conversation, sponsored by [the Canopy Lab](#). It draws on publicly available technical resources. While not exhaustive and recognizing that technical approaches vary based on funder, implementing partner and practitioner priorities, incentives, and capabilities, this summary highlights key inflection points in the evolution of WEE and GESI within MSD and is designed to prompt reflection, dialogue, and shared learning among participants. This brief is the first in a three-part series.

Introduction

Over the past decades, approaches to Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) and GESI in MSD have undergone a significant shift. What began as a focus on participation and access has evolved into efforts to challenge the underlying rules and power dynamics that drive exclusion and, more recently, toward positioning inclusion as a driver of systemic transformation where diverse groups help redefine the goals, values, and structures of the economy itself.

GESI approaches have become more sophisticated, however practitioner capacity and incentives to apply them have often lagged behind, especially in fast-moving or resource-constrained environments or when funders or program leadership are disengaged. This disconnect can hinder the very systemic change that inclusive approaches aim to achieve.

Recognizing this evolution, and the practical gaps that remain, is essential to designing, funding, and delivering programs that are both inclusive and impactful. We need to understand where we've come from to inform where we're headed, so we can build on what works, avoid past pitfalls, and shape more equitable systems for the future.

What is Market Systems Development? The key to MSD lies in using systems principles and frameworks to understand the underlying causes of challenges ("why?") in order to identify system-level changes to respond to them ("what?"), and to guide interventions that can bring lasting change ("How?").

While MSD has matured over time, the [core components](#) have remained largely the same: 1) a focus on achieving/contributing to systemic change; 2) an emphasis on understanding and addressing underlying constraints; 3) engagement with market actors to drive change; and 4) continuous learning and adaptation.

GESI technical evolution at a glance

In the early stages of integrating gender into economic development programming, many efforts focused on ensuring interventions adhered to basic "do no harm" principles. This meant avoiding unintended negative consequences for women and marginalized groups such as reinforcing harmful gender roles or increasing unpaid workloads rather than actively addressing exclusion or promoting empowerment. While limited in ambition, these early safeguards laid a foundation for more intentional GESI integration in market systems work.

They also created the starting point for the development of widely used tools such as gender equality markers.

The technical evolution of GESI within MSD has progressed through several distinct phases.

- **Prior to 2012**, the dominant approach focused on women's participation through skills training, microcredit, and income-generating activities. Efforts emphasized basic gender sensitivity and “do no harm” principles but were often treated as add-ons rather than integral to economic development strategies and lacked a systems perspective.
- **Between 2012 and 2016**, the field began to formally engage with MSD approaches, marked by the introduction of WEE into Making Markets Work for the Poor (M4P) frameworks. This period brought recognition that systemic constraints shape women's roles in markets and that robust measurement was essential.
- **From 2016 to 2020**, a more systems-informed and norm-aware approach emerged, with increased attention to gendered power dynamics, social norms, and intra-household relations. Practitioners began to adopt frameworks such as the Women's Economic Empowerment in Agricultural Market Systems (WEAMS) framework and the DCED WEE Standard.

It is important to note that while these shifts mark clear progress in the technical sophistication of WEE and GESI approaches, their application has varied significantly across programs. Many projects grappled with organizational barriers, limited incentives, and capacity gaps that in the best cases only hindered the consistent integration of WEE and GESI principles and in the worst cases, relegated it to a check-box exercise.

Key shifts in thinking and practice: 2012-2020

During this period, the MSD community witnessed important shifts in how WEE and GESI were understood and pursued. Early efforts emphasized access to credit, markets, and training, but often overlooked agency, norms, and structural barriers. As the field matured, programs began to measure empowerment more meaningfully, address systemic constraints, and embed gender and inclusion into the core of economic strategies. Practitioners also recognized the limitations of mainstreaming alone, leading to the adoption of twin-track approaches that combine inclusive systems change with targeted support to women and marginalized groups. These shifts reflected a deeper attention to power, context, and sustainability in driving equitable economic outcomes.

From Access to Agency and Voice

Early programs focused on access to markets, credit, and training. By the mid-2010s, approaches expanded to include women's voice in decision-making, control over income, and negotiation power in households and value chains.

From counting women to measuring empowerment

Monitoring shifted from output tracking (e.g. % women reached) to measuring changes in agency, relations, and norms. Tools such as outcome mapping, contribution analysis, and adapted DCED indicators became more common, as did the spider-graph popularized by the Market Development Facility (see Box 1).

Box 1: The [Market Development Facility \(MDF\)](#), a multi-country, multi-phase*, MSD program funded by DFAT and implemented by Palladium and consortium partners, introduced spider graphs as a participatory tool to track changes in women's agency within market system interventions. Rooted in five-domain WEE framework, these visuals help women self-assess aspects like decision-making authority, time-use, and control over income. Co-created during reflection sessions, the graphs provide a snapshot of empowerment and allow MDF to monitor shifts over time, particularly for women in the 'missing middle'; those in support functions in male-dominated sectors. This approach strengthened MDF's learning and adaptation by making less tangible outcomes visible and actionable, supporting both systemic change and women's inclusion.

*Phase 1: 2011-2017; Phase 2: 2017-2022; Phase 3: 2022-2027

From individual beneficiaries to systemic constraints

The M4P WEE framework (2012) and later WEAMS (2016) introduced systems thinking into WEE. These frameworks emphasized the importance of understanding and addressing structural barriers: norms, rules, and institutions.

From add-on to embedded in core strategy

Earlier efforts added GESI components to existing economic programs. Over time, leading programs began to embed GESI objectives in core program logic, with tailored sector selection, partnership models, and adaptive strategies, as exemplified by the Alliances Lesser Caucuses Programme (Box 2).

Box 2: The [Alliances \(Lesser\) Caucasus Program \(ALCP\)](#), a multi-phase*, multi-donor (ADA, Sida, SDC) MSD program, implemented by Mercy Corps in Georgia was an early champion of embedding women's economic empowerment (WEE) at the core of market systems programming. As one of the original contributors to the M4P Hub's 2011 initiative to strengthen WEE within the M4P framework, ALCP helped shape foundational thinking in the field. While initial efforts added gender components to economic interventions, ALCP steadily evolved to integrate GESI into its strategic and operational backbone: selecting sectors, forming partnerships, and adapting interventions based on fully integrated gendered analyses. This shift allowed the team to design both gender-sensitized and overt interventions that addressed structural constraints such as mobility limitations, unpaid care burdens, and lack of decision-making power. WEE became a core programmatic outcome, supported by gender-disaggregated monitoring, regular data reflection, and an organizational culture geared towards equitable impact.

*Pilot Phase: 2008-2011; Phase 1: 2011-2014; Phase 2: 2014-2017; Phase 3: 2017-2022; Alliances Caucasus 2: 2022-2027 (MSD Agri programme embedded in climate adaptation and sustainability)

From parallel activities to a twin-track or multi-pronged approach

Early efforts to integrate GESI focused on mainstreaming WEE and GESI considerations across the project life cycle ensuring that gender and inclusion were reflected in sector selection, partner engagement, intervention design, and MEL systems. While this marked important progress, many programs found that mainstreaming alone was not enough to address the structural inequalities that shape exclusion. In response, programs increasingly adopted a twin-track or multi-pronged approach combining GESI mainstreaming with targeted interventions that directly support women and marginalized groups, such as ELAN RDC (Box 3). This shift recognizes that inclusive market change requires both equity-focused engagement and system-level transformation.

Box 3: Multiple pathways. [ELAN RDC](#), a two-phased* MSD program in the Democratic Republic of Congo funded by FCDO and implemented by Adam Smith International, took a deliberate, multi-pronged approach to promoting WEE by tackling restrictive social norms. However, recognizing the risks of pushing too hard against prevailing norms, the program carefully tailored its interventions to local realities, designing accessible training and introducing time-savings technologies to reduce mobility and domestic constraints. At the same time, ELAN strategically worked to shift market actor perceptions, building business cases for engaging women as sales agents and demonstrating their value to large firms like mobile operators. Internally, it institutionalized inclusion through a GESI Champion Model that decentralized expertise, built internal capacity, and embedded gender considerations across sectors. This approach helped the program move beyond access to build women's agency and voice, while fostering broader shifts in market and organizational norms.

*Phase 1: 2012-2018; Phase 2: 2019-2021

Reflection questions

The following questions are intended to prompt critical thinking and shared learning around how technical approaches to GESI have evolved between 2012 and 2020 and what this evolution means for current and future programming.

- How did programming between 2012 and 2020 move beyond women's access to begin addressing agency, voice, and power dynamics? What tactics, messaging, and resources, or management of competing priorities were instrumental in achieving this shift?
- What tools or frameworks were useful in informing GESI technical approaches? And which were useful in operationalizing the approaches?
- What were the enabling or limiting factors (e.g. leadership, partner capacity, donor flexibility) that shaped a program's ability to implement more sophisticated, systems-informed GESI approaches?

Resource library

The following resource library offers a curated selection of discussion papers, case studies, guidance documents, and frameworks that have shaped the evolution of GESI and WEE in MSD.

Discussion papers & case studies

- [Beyond Income: A Critical Analysis of Agency Measurement in Economic Programming \(2018\)](#)
- [Confronting Organisational Challenges to Mainstreaming WEE In MSD Programs \(2019\)](#)
- [M4P WEE Discussion Paper \(2016\)](#)
- [Making Digital Finance Work for Women in the MENA Region: Eight Lessons from the Field \(2020\)](#)
- [Market Systems Approaches to enabling Women's Economic Empowerment through Addressing Unpaid Care Work \(2016\)](#)
- [Promoting Gender-Responsive Business Models in DRC Lessons from ÉLAN RDC \(2017\)](#)
- [What Can Be Achieved in Women's Economic Empowerment: Early Lessons and Examples from Operationalising a Women's Economic Empowerment Framework in a Multi-Country Context \(2017\)](#)
- [Women's Economic Empowerment in M4P Projects \(2012\)](#)

Guidance, frameworks & tools

- [How to Put Gender and WEE Into Practice in M4P \(2016\)](#)
- [Integrating Women's Economic Empowerment into M4P Approaches \(2013\)](#)
- [Mainstreaming Women's Economic Empowerment: Practitioner Guidelines \(2013\)](#)
- [Making the Business Case: Women's Economic Empowerment In Market Systems Development \(2015\)](#)
- [Mainstreaming Women's Economic Empowerment \(WEE\) in Market Systems Development \(2016\)](#)
- [Measuring the Results: Women's Economic Empowerment in Private Sector Development \(2014\)](#)
- [The Social Norms Factor: How Gendered Social Norms Influence How We Empower Women in Market Systems Development \(2016\)](#)
- [WEAMS Framework \(2016\)](#)
- [Women's Economic Empowerment: Pushing the Frontiers of Inclusive Market Development \(2015\)](#)
- [Working With the Private Sector to Empower Women: What to Measure and How to Build the Business Case for Change \(2019\)](#)