# Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in Market Systems Development: Synthesis Brief #3

## "Looking Ahead"

The third and final session of the Global GESI in MSD Conversation Series shifted the focus from reflection to foresight. After exploring how GESI in MSD evolved (2012–2020) and how it is currently practiced under pressure (2020–2025), this session asked a forward-looking question: *What do we need to deliver stronger, more sustainable GESI in MSD?*

This synthesis captures key takeaways from the breakout group discussions on what is needed to do effective GESI work in MSD programs. The groups explored related aspects such as the characteristics of meaningful backing, the features of strong systems, and the resources required to do this work well. Discussions considered both supportive and unsupportive funder environments, reflecting the current divided nature of the development sector.

## What we need.

**Clear leadership support, integration of GESI across program systems, and dedicated time and resources to embed inclusion meaningfully are what's needed.** Over the course of the Conversation Series, a surprising level of consensus emerged on what it takes to do this work well. Despite the diversity of contexts, roles, and experiences represented, participants consistently returned to these three critical enablers. These were not seen as optional add-ons, but as foundational conditions, without which GESI in MSD remains largely aspirational. Participants stressed that progress depends on structural shifts that allow teams to act with clarity and conviction and not just individual champions or technical tools.

 **In more supportive environments, participants stressed the urgency of equipping programs with the time, expertise, and resources needed to deliver on their ambitions, including the ability to prioritize and sequence effectively.** These elements are essential for managing the complexity of inclusion work and for translating broad commitments into practical, sustained action. Without these, even the best-intentioned efforts risk becoming symbolic rather than systemic, especially in contexts where mandates for inclusion are expanding and expectations are rising.

> *"We are asking implementers to integrate everything: climate, GESI, localization and do it with the same budget and team. That doesn't work." – Participant*
>
> *"It is important that we resource the resourcing of GESI." – Participant*

**In more restrictive environments, the emphasis was on the need for political cover, safe spaces, and quiet but strategic action**. GESI work in these settings, where space and resources for inclusion have shrunk or evaporated entirely, often relies on discretion, trusted relationships, and leadership that shields staff while preserving room to maneuver.

> *"Leadership needs to provide political cover and psychological safety." – Participant*

In both settings, the message was clear: enabling inclusion is not just about commitment, but about building the hard and soft infrastructure that makes commitment real.

## What does leadership support and backing look like?

**Leadership backing is critical, not just in name, but in visible, sustained support that grants permission to push boundaries and protection when resistance arises.** According to participants, this kind of leadership helps legitimize GESI as core to program strategy, rather than a side effort. It involves resourcing, public endorsement, and consistent follow-through, particularly when inclusion work challenges power dynamics or faces political sensitivities. In the absence of this kind of leadership, participants spoke honestly about the isolation, burnout, and sidelining that GESI staff often experience, especially in environments where inclusion is treated as optional. This marginalization was described as both professionally demoralizing and personally draining. GESI practitioners often find themselves caught between rising expectations and limited authority.

**The support needed to sustain this work goes beyond formal leadership.** Participants emphasized the importance of peer networks that offer solidarity, safe spaces to share challenges, and opportunities to exchange practical knowledge across contexts. They also pointed to the vital role of colleagues in communications and MEL roles who can help tell a compelling story about inclusion, generate demand through evidence, and ensure that GESI outcomes are recognized and valued. These allies help make the case that inclusion is not an add-on, but a core part of doing development well.

> *"We need to continue to come together as a strong voice… not risk working individually."*
> *– Participant*

**Leadership that recognizes inclusion as a strategic priority rather than a compliance task.** Leaders who genuinely understand and value GESI are more likely to embed it across program decisions and approaches. Participants highlighted the importance of hiring Team Leaders and senior managers not only for their technical credentials but also for their values and mindset. In restrictive environments, where formal mandates may be limited, this kind of strategic hiring was seen as essential, allowing leadership to quietly shape program culture and priorities in ways that keep inclusion on the agenda.

## What does effective GESI mainstreaming across program systems look like?

**It starts with design, staffing, operations, and resourcing because inclusion outcomes don't begin at implementation.** Participants described how inclusion can either be embedded in a program's DNA or left on the margins, depending on how early and intentionally it is built in.

> *"If we say GESI is truly mainstreamed, then it's everybody's job." – Participant*

**Foundational onboarding systems, MEL, performance management must reinforce inclusion consistently and practically**. This includes:

- GESI-informed onboarding for all staff, including operational and finance teams.

- Integrating GESI indicators into MEL systems, with both quantitative and qualitative measures.

- Embedding inclusion into performance reviews, team learning processes, and leadership development pathways.

**Widespread sensitization and going deeper than one-off GESI 101 training were also highlighted as important to effective mainstreaming**. Programs that succeed invest in cross-functional understanding and behavioral adoption at all levels. Rather than imposing compliance, they cultivate buy-in and shared language across teams and institutions over time, building the kind of familiarity and fluency that allows inclusion to be practiced, not just preached.

> *"Sustainable GESI integration requires widespread sensitization… this encourages genuine organizational adoption and embeds GESI in institutional culture." – Participant*

**Contextualizing systems and tools was a recurring theme across the breakout groups.** Participants noted that while templates and toolkits can offer helpful starting points, they often fall short when applied rigidly in complex environments. Standardized frameworks may not capture local power dynamics, social norms, or the political risks of engaging on inclusion, especially in contexts where GESI is contested or misunderstood.

**To be useful, foundational processes must be designed with enough flexibility to allow for adaptation.** Participants shared examples of systems that created friction rather than support: risk matrices that flagged inclusion efforts as "too political," results frameworks that could not accommodate iterative, relational work, or procurement policies that made it difficult to work with informal or community-based groups. In contrast, systems that worked well were those that made space for staff judgment and adaptation, where GESI advisors were trusted to shape tools in response to local realities, and where accountability mechanisms were used to learn, not just to report.

> *"Tools need to work for us, not become a barrier to the very change we're trying to make." – Participant*

## *What does adequate GESI resourcing and time look like?*

**Adequate resourcing means more than a line in the budget: it must be reflected in staffing, systems, and day-to-day decision-making**. Participants emphasized the need for dedicated GESI roles with sufficient time to engage strategically, rather than being pulled across multiple priorities or siloed into short-term activities. This includes ensuring that GESI advisors are involved early in program design, decision-making, and adaptation processes and not just brought in for review or compliance.

**Specialized expertise and broader team capability are both needed.** Many shared examples where hiring staff with deep experience in GESI, and especially intersectional approaches, allowed programs to move beyond surface-level inclusion. But technical expertise alone was not enough. Participants noted that programs also need the time and resources to train broader teams so that GESI becomes part of everyone's role, rather than resting solely on one or two advisors. This helps embed inclusion across day-to-day operations and reduces the risk of GESI work becoming isolated or dependent on individual champions.

**Flexible funding allows programs to act on inclusion opportunities that fall outside rigid plans and timelines**. It can help overcome budgeting structures that often limit the ability to engage with grassroots or informal groups, test adapted delivery models or invest in new relationships. Inclusion opportunities frequently emerge beyond planned timelines or budget lines. For example, when a partner shifts priorities, a policy window unexpectedly opens, or marginalized groups provide new feedback. In these moments, the ability to reallocate funds or draw on discretionary resources can make the difference between symbolic engagement and real impact. Without flexible funding, programs can default to safer, more formalized actors and miss the chance to work with those most excluded. Participants stressed that flexibility does not mean lack of accountability but rather enabling responsiveness and iteration within a clear strategic framework.

> *"GESI is about being ready to move when the opportunity is there. If the budget can't move, the program can't either." - Participant*

**Strengthening local systems and investing in local leadership are cornerstones of sustainable inclusion work**. This means going beyond program-led activities to invest in the actors, institutions, and networks that will remain after a program ends. Participants highlighted the value of working through embedded organizations such as Women's Councils, local DPOs, and community associations that already hold knowledge, trust, and legitimacy. These groups are often best placed to navigate social and political dynamics and can act as long-term stewards of inclusive change.

> *"We need to invest in local leadership, so GESI activities are sustainable." – Participant*
>
> *"Programs come and go. These actors stay." - Participant*

**This requires a shift in how programs think about delivery and impact, not just in terms of short-term results, but through the lens of long-term capability and local ownership.** Without rethinking the technical foundations of GESI work, including who leads, who adapts, and who holds accountability, inclusion will remain vulnerable to political shifts, funding volatility, and staff turnover. To move from aspiration to practice, the approach must evolve to prioritize continuity and continuously strengthen local leadership**.**

**Relational work is essential to advancing inclusion, but it often goes unrecognized and mostly under-resourced.** MSD programs need to create space for GESI staff to build trust with staff and partners, understand power dynamics, and adapt tools to the realities on the ground. Participants described how this kind of work is critical but rarely fits into logframes, planning cycles, or costed workplans. It does not always produce quick results, but it lays the foundation for deeper change.

**Resourcing is not just about money**. It is about recognizing and valuing the time, skills, and flexibility required to do GESI work well. That includes making space for learning, adaptation, and reflection, and understanding that the most important shifts are often the hardest to measure. Without this kind of support, GESI risks becoming fragmented or sidelined, rather than woven into the fabric of how programs work.

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**New ambitions, but inherited strategies: Is inclusion work on the right path?**

The scope of inclusion work has expanded dramatically in recent years, reflecting a growing ambition, in some contexts, to reach more groups, address deeper exclusion, and deliver more transformative change. But while expectations have grown, the strategies, systems, and structures supporting this work have not evolved at the same pace.

Many MSD programs continue to apply a similar technical approach across a wide range of inclusion priorities, using the same tools and frameworks for gender, youth, LGBTQIA+, and other groups. Disability inclusion has challenged some of these assumptions, pushing the field to adapt. But in most cases, programs still rely on a familiar mix of mainstreaming and targeted activities. Part of the challenge is that programs have not had the resources or the timeline to tailor strategies. As the scope of inclusion has grown, the foundations and delivery models have not kept pace, leaving teams to deliver broader ambitions with tools that were never designed for the task.

There is also a strong element of path dependency. Because early inclusion strategies were developed around gender, many programs have extended that same logic to other forms of exclusion. Over time, these inherited models have become default practice even when the underlying dynamics differ.

As one participant put it, *"We've tacked on youth, disability, social inclusion, to our gender strategy without revisiting or rethinking the fundamentals: strategy, team, resources. Do we need to go back and approach this from a different lens?"*

In many contexts, MSD programs are being asked to take on more complex and layered inclusion work, but with the same tools, the same teams, and the same tight timelines. These reflections raised a set of timely and critical questions: Are we working with strategies that match the ambition? Are the roles, structures, and skillsets still aligned? Are we asking the right questions? And from the right perspectives?

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## What's Next

We are excited to take this conversation forward, including continuing to explore the challenging but important questions raised throughout the series such as whether we need to revisit the fundamental framing of inclusion. Insights from the series will feed into an influencing brief designed for funders, implementers, and program leaders. This will be launched through a public webinar in October 2025, featured at the Market Systems Symposium in Durban, and shared through additional donor-focused briefings shaped by your feedback and networks.