

Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion in Economic and Trade Programs

Insights from the Canopy Lab's
Global Conversation Series

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) in economic, trade and market systems programs has evolved. From safeguarding against harm to advancing inclusion as a driver of systemic transformation and shared prosperity. What began with a focus on women's access to credit and participation in training has expanded into deeper engagement with social norms, power relations, care systems, climate resilience, and digital transitions that shape economic participation.

Despite clear progress, 2025 has brought new challenges. Some contexts are seeing renewed resistance to inclusion and equity agendas, while others are widening their scope and ambition. In response to this moment, the Canopy Lab convened a global conversation with GEDSI practitioners to take stock of the journey so far. Across three sessions, participants examined how approaches evolved between 2012 and 2020, how they are being applied under growing pressure from 2020 to 2025, and what will be required to carry the work forward.

What stands out about this body of work is its scale and resonance, in addition to its timeliness. More than 400 practitioners from diverse backgrounds and lived experiences, with intentional emphasis on voices from Southeast Asia and the Pacific, shared their insights. Despite differences in geography and context, participants voiced strong consensus on what works and what is needed to do this work well. This synthesis distills those discussions and draws on technical papers, developed for the series, that trace the evolution of approaches. This brief offers development partners, including DFAT and like-minded agencies, a set of 'non-negotiables' for advancing GEDSI through economic equality and trade, along with recommendations to create the space and expertise needed to do more, and do better, in the years ahead.

Why Inclusive Trade and Economic Equality Matters

Gender equality, disability and social inclusion are central to the performance and resilience of economic systems. Trade and markets that exclude women, youth, people with disabilities, and marginalized groups operate below their potential, missing out on innovation, productivity, and demand. Inclusive market systems are better able to adapt to shocks, attract investment, and deliver sustainable growth.

Donor investment in GEDSI is a lever for scale and sustainability. Embedding GEDSI from the outset: into analysis, partnerships, and policy engagement, helps ensure that trade and economic growth is broad-based, market actors are diverse, and benefits are more equitably shared.

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1. Looking Back: Evolution 2012–2020

Early integration of gender in economic programs often treated women as beneficiaries, emphasizing participation through microcredit, skills training, and income generation. Over time, programs recognised that systemic barriers such as social norms, institutions, and power relations were the real constraints.

Key shifts included:

- **From access to agency and voice:** Programs moved from counting women reached to measuring empowerment, decision-making, and influence.
- **From add-on to embedded:** Leading initiatives embedded women's economic empowerment objectives into core program logic, sector selection, and partnership models.
- **From mainstreaming alone to twin-track:** Programs began combining mainstreamed approaches with targeted interventions to address structural inequalities.

Early efforts showed that embedding gender into strategies, monitoring systems, and organisational culture created durable change. Rather than being treated as an add-on, inclusion became part of how opportunities were identified, how success was measured, and how teams worked together. The DFAT funded Market Development Facility (Box 1) is a noteworthy example of a program that intentionally integrated gender and women's economic empowerment and leveraged its robust monitoring and results measurement system to put WEE front and center for decision making.

This integration shifted incentives and behaviours across whole portfolios, making it harder to roll back progress even when priorities shifted. Over time, such an approach improved outcomes for women and excluded groups and also fostered organisations and systems that were more resilient, adaptive, and aligned with broader development goals.

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 allowed 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. It also served as a powerful example to other economic development programs.

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

Yet application across programs and organisations was uneven, and critical gaps persisted. Leadership engagement, in some cases, was often superficial. Some senior managers might endorse inclusion rhetorically, but without modelling commitment or allocating resources, teams struggled to move beyond compliance. Organisational incentives were also misaligned; staff were rewarded for delivering quick wins or meeting output targets, while the slower, relational work of shifting power dynamics and norms received little recognition or support. At the same time, practitioner capability often lagged behind ambition. Many staff members were enthusiastic about inclusion but lacked technical skills, confidence, or institutional backing to translate commitment into practice. These gaps undermined the quality, depth, and sustainability of programming, leading to uneven outcomes and, in some cases, reinforcing the perception that inclusion was

negotiable rather than central to effective economic development.

This period demonstrated that progress in gender equality benefits everyone, but durable change depends on both hard and soft infrastructure: the systems, tools, and resources that institutionalise inclusion, and the leadership, values, and cultures that sustain it. Programs that combined these elements laid the groundwork for a more inclusive, locally led, and outcomes-focused approach to economic equality and trade.

2. Looking Now: Practice Under Pressure (2020–2025)

The shocks to the development industry, from massive cuts to aid funding to the COVID pandemic, in recent years have heightened tensions around inclusion, rolling back commitments in some cases and, in others, expanding expectations without matching resources. In some contexts, diluted language, reduced staffing, or shifting political priorities have fueled disillusionment and burnout among practitioners. Many described feeling pressured to downplay GEDSI to preserve room to operate, even while remaining deeply committed to inclusive outcomes. This contradiction has left some feeling morally compromised.

“We’re being asked to deliver inclusion, but without saying the word inclusion.”

In contrast, DFAT continues to provide critical backing for gender equality, disability and social inclusion, offering important anchors and signaling that inclusion remains a shared priority across the international agenda, with the timely release of Australia’s International Gender Equality Strategy as just one example. At the same time, expectations have grown faster than the resourcing to support them. This mismatch places programs in a bind: they are encouraged to be more ambitious on inclusion while operating with limited budgets, technical capacity, and timeframes. The result is that inclusion risks being stretched thin, delivered in fragmented ways, or framed as a reporting exercise rather than a transformative practice.

“The pressure to do more across gender, disability, and youth keeps increasing, but the support doesn’t.”

These pressures are compounded by persistent capability gaps. Even when teams are broadly supportive of inclusion, many lack the tools, confidence, or institutional backing to translate commitment into practice. Too often, GEDSI champions carry the work alone, leading to strain, isolation, and diluted approaches where inclusion risks being treated as negotiable. Programs are adapting by prioritising and sequencing ambitions and focusing on areas of greatest impact. This has led some initiatives like the Inclusion Project (Box 2) to double down on depth, using locally grounded approaches that blend market systems change with community engagement to protect space for genuine inclusion.

For inclusion to remain durable, both partners and implementers need to invest in capability, leadership, and systems that sustain the work beyond individual champions.

This requires adaptive funding models, outcome-focused performance frameworks, and consistent leadership backing that grants permission to innovate and protection when resistance arises. Programs that have maintained momentum during periods of pressure have done so by fostering collaboration, drawing on local leadership, and maintaining clarity of purpose even in politically constrained environments. These experiences underscore that inclusion is not just a technical exercise but a political and relational process.

Box 2: The INCLUSION Project (2022-2027), an inclusive Market Systems Development (iMSD) initiative led by Wahana Visi Indonesia (WVI) with support from the Australian Government through ANCP, combines market systems change with community engagement to shift gender and social norms across Eastern Indonesia. The project strengthens value chains in maize, rice, kenari, shallots, coconut charcoal, and biofertiliser by partnering with private actors, village governments, and intermediary service providers to improve access to inputs, extension, and finance. Alongside these market shifts, the project invests heavily in household and community behaviour change, using gender transformative financial literacy (GIFT), religious leader engagement, peer learning groups, and farmer-led demonstrations to build household capacity and challenge restrictive norms that limit women and people with disabilities.

This dual approach has produced tangible market results and measurable social change. Private partners report increased profitability, new jobs are now held almost equally by men and women, and village governments are funding seeds and biofertiliser. At the same time, supportive attitudes toward women's economic participation have more than doubled, women have taken leadership roles in kenari and shallot processing, and households report stronger joint decision-making over finances. The integration of iMSD with norm-shifting community engagement has made inclusion visible, practical, and commercially relevant, helping market actors recognise the value of diverse participation and anchoring behaviour change within local systems. The model offers a credible example of how inclusive market programming can drive both systemic change and deeper social transformation.

This build's on WV's [evidence base](#) on iMSD and women's economic empowerment, combining gender inclusive business models and gender transformative programming addressing unequal relations and social norms, to promote holistic results.

3. Looking Ahead: What It Will Take

Enabling inclusion is not just about commitment: it is about building the infrastructure that makes commitment real. This includes both the hard systems and the soft foundations that support lasting change. The hard infrastructure encompasses program systems, tools, resources, and accountability mechanisms such as Theories of Change, Results Chains, budgets, and dedicated staff roles that ensure inclusion is built into decision-making and delivery. The soft infrastructure includes the leadership, organisational culture, and values that promote collaboration, psychological safety, and accountability. Without both, commitments risk remaining rhetorical, producing surface-level results that cannot withstand political or institutional shifts.

When these elements align, inclusion becomes embedded in how organisations think and act, creating change that is resilient and adaptive. To deliver durable gender equality, disability and social inclusion across economic systems, three enabling conditions are non-negotiable: *visible leadership, integration across program systems, and adequate resourcing.*

1. **Visible leadership matters because it legitimises inclusion as core to program strategy rather than a side effort.** Leaders who demonstrate consistent commitment by allocating resources, endorsing inclusion publicly, and following through when challenges arise create the space and confidence for others to act.

This kind of leadership provides both political cover and psychological safety when GEDSI work challenges established norms or faces resistance. Recruiting and empowering senior

leaders who embody inclusive values is therefore as essential as technical expertise.

2. **Integration across systems is equally critical.** Inclusion must be embedded into design, staffing, MEL, procurement, and performance management processes. Programs that succeed cultivate cross-functional buy-in, contextualise tools, and maintain flexibility to adapt to social and political realities. Donors like DFAT play a pivotal role in enabling this integration by setting realistic expectations, resourcing technical depth, and rewarding programs that demonstrate genuine learning and adaptation. Their support determines whether integration becomes a driver of transformative change or a compliance exercise.
3. **Adequate resourcing means committing the money, people, and time required to make inclusion real.** Norm change is slow, relational work, and programs cannot shortcut it. This requires specialised GEDSI expertise, wider team capability, and enough space in workplans to build trust, safely shift behaviours, and stay engaged when progress is incremental. Programs also need discretionary funds to seize openings and to back local leadership that can sustain change beyond project cycles. When flexible funding is paired with clear accountability for results, teams are better able to navigate complexity and protect the long-term work of transforming norms and institutions.

With this foundation in place, GEDSI in trade and economic growth programming can move from fragile to durable. But building durability also requires looking ahead. As the scope of inclusion expands to ethnic minorities, LGBTQIA+, and intersecting exclusions, the field cannot rely on frameworks originally developed for gender equality alone. Participants emphasized that strategies must evolve, ensuring that programs draw on broader, intersectional approaches while still retaining the focus and rigor that gender work has helped to establish.

“We’ve tacked on youth, disability, social inclusion to our gender strategy without rethinking the fundamentals.”

Insights for DFAT's Gender Equality Strategy

The Conversation Series surfaced practitioner insights on where inclusion efforts are advancing in economic growth programming, where they are stalling, and what conditions matter most. While the series was not designed around DFAT funded programs and focused primarily on tactics, the findings reinforce the priorities set out in Australia's International Gender Equality Strategy.

Practitioners were clear that durable inclusion requires tackling the root causes of exclusion. Economic participation is shaped by forces well beyond market dynamics. Progress slows when SGBV persists, when SRHR is restricted, and when women's voices are absent in workplaces, markets, community groups, climate action and political leadership. Programs that treat these dynamics as outside their remit tend to deliver short lived or surface level results, yet participants noted that this remains common practice in trade and economic growth programming.

This is where DFAT's approach is particularly relevant. The International Gender Equality Strategy's five priorities map closely to the barriers identified by practitioners. By requiring that 80 percent of investments meaningfully address gender equality and that all investments over 3 million include gender equality objectives, DFAT signals that these priorities apply across the full development portfolio. The IMR further clarifies expectations and tracks the quality of GEDSI integration.

Continued, unwavering leadership, targeted investment in capability, coaching and technical depth would help ensure the strategy's ambitions translate into consistent, context-appropriate inclusion across DFAT's economic and trade portfolio.

Implications for donors

Donors have a pivotal role in determining whether GEDSI efforts are surface-level or genuinely transformative. The Global GEDSI Conversation Series identified clear implications for how donors can align political intent with operational practice. These implications are consistent with the direction set out in DFAT's International Gender Equality Strategy (2025).

1. **Support and expand political space for GEDSI.** Donor mandates often determine whether programs can keep GEDSI on the table, particularly in contexts where governments are cautious or resistant. Participants stressed that donor clarity provides legitimacy, protection, and the political cover implementers need to engage with sensitive issues such as SGBV, SRHR, exclusionary norms, and unequal decision-making.

Practitioners noted that donors like Australia and the EU have acted as critical counterweights to rollbacks in inclusion language and policy. Beyond signalling, donors can reinforce political space by rewarding teams that take calculated risks, backing inclusive leaders, and providing psychological and political safety when GEDSI work challenges entrenched power structures.

- 2. Invest in capabilities, culture and knowledge sharing.** Programs perform better when GEDSI is embedded in organisational culture and capabilities. This means funding dedicated GEDSI expertise, but also broad-based capacity across trade, economic growth, and skills teams. It requires equipping staff with practical tools to integrate inclusion into market analysis, partnership models, and systems change.

Donors can accelerate this by supporting peer networks, communities of practice, and leadership development initiatives that reinforce inclusive norms and provide safe spaces for reflection. These approaches reflect DFAT's emphasis on locally led leadership, intersectionality, and the need to strengthen women's voice and agency in decision-making structures across all five priority areas. As standard setters, donors can also raise expectations over time by requiring visible leadership on GEDSI and assessing performance on meaningful outcomes.

- 3. Prioritise flexibility, adaptive funding, and investment in norm change.** Practitioners emphasised that rigid logic models, short timeframes, earmarked budgets, and inflexible procurement systems make it difficult to respond to social and political realities. Norm change is slow, relational, and often non-linear, yet programs are frequently resourced for short-term outputs. Donors have significant influence over this dynamic: they determine whether teams can respond to political openings, test new approaches, and engage meaningfully with marginalised groups.

Programs need discretionary resources for experimentation, the flexibility to pivot when conditions shift, and the mandate to engage with underlying norms that constrain women, people with disabilities, and other excluded groups. When donors pair ambition with adaptive funding and robust, outcomes-focused accountability, they protect the long-term, often incremental work that makes inclusion durable.

Conclusion

The Global Conversation Series revealed both the resilience of inclusive practice and its vulnerabilities. Practitioners remain committed, but they are stretched by expanding mandates, limited resources, and in some cases, political headwinds. The message for donors is clear: inclusion requires leadership that champions the work, systems that embed it, and resources that make it possible.

As we look ahead, the landscape for inclusion work will only grow more complex. In addition to the non-negotiables in this paper, practitioners will need to be more deliberate about how language is used and adapted to build a broader coalition of allies. This cannot come at the expense of precision. Terms such as women's economic empowerment and disability equity must hold shared meaning and technical depth, not become labels for surface level activity. As economic systems shift under the pressures of climate change, digital transformation and demographic change, programs will need deeper and more specialised expertise to navigate the next frontier of inclusive trade and economic growth. The task is to maintain clarity of purpose, strengthen capability across sectors, and ensure that inclusion remains substantive, credible and grounded in the lived realities of the people it seeks to benefit.



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