

Prioritising Gender Equity, Disability, and Social Inclusion in the CLEAN Helpdesk

Rebekah Martin, August 2025



The CLEAN Helpdesk integrates gender equity, disability, and social inclusion (GEDSI) through all technical assistance (TA) requests to advance more effective and sustainable climate, environment and nature (CEN) outcomes. We support UK government officials and programmes to embed equitable outcomes, meaningfully engage socially excluded groups, and create more opportunities to promote equality and inclusion through their existing work.

This note captures findings on how we have mainstreamed GEDSI through the programme and consortium, significantly increasing our level of ambition, and avoiding the pitfalls of GEDSI becoming a ‘tick-box exercise’ or a ‘nice to have’. It draws from a GEDSI Scan exercise¹ conducted with CLEAN Helpdesk staff in March-June 2025, which sought to understand how GEDSI is integrated into programming, to capture learnings, and identify areas to improve.

Why do we mainstream GEDSI and safeguarding in our technical assistance?

It is widely accepted that the adverse impacts of climate change, environmental degradation, and biodiversity loss are not felt equally and that mainstreaming GEDSI is crucial for effective and sustainable CEN outcomes. Pre-existing inequalities and barriers to resources and information means that socially excluded groups face disproportionate risks from climate change, with negative effects for their health, access to food and water, livelihoods, and

security. Despite these well-documented linkages, GEDSI is frequently not considered, or siloed, in CEN programming. See our two-pager for further details [on the importance of GEDSI](#).

Our approach to GEDSI at the CLEAN Helpdesk

Looking inward and outwards

Our GEDSI Strategy has two main objectives:

1. To mainstream GEDSI within our consortium² (looking inwards),
2. To mainstream GEDSI across our technical delivery (looking outwards).

We take this approach because we understand that for GEDSI to be effectively mainstreamed in programme delivery rather than being treated as a tick-box exercise, it is necessary for the people working on the programme to understand GEDSI, have the skills and commitment to mainstream it within their work, and for there to be a supportive working environment for them to promote GEDSI.

¹ A GEDSI Scan is a participatory learning process developed by Social Development Direct. The tailored process for the CLEAN Helpdesk involved a document review, survey, and a validation and learning workshop, and developing a report and updated actions for our GEDSI Strategy.

² Our consortium is led by SouthSouthNorth, with partners ODI Global, Paul Watkiss Associates, and Social Development Direct.

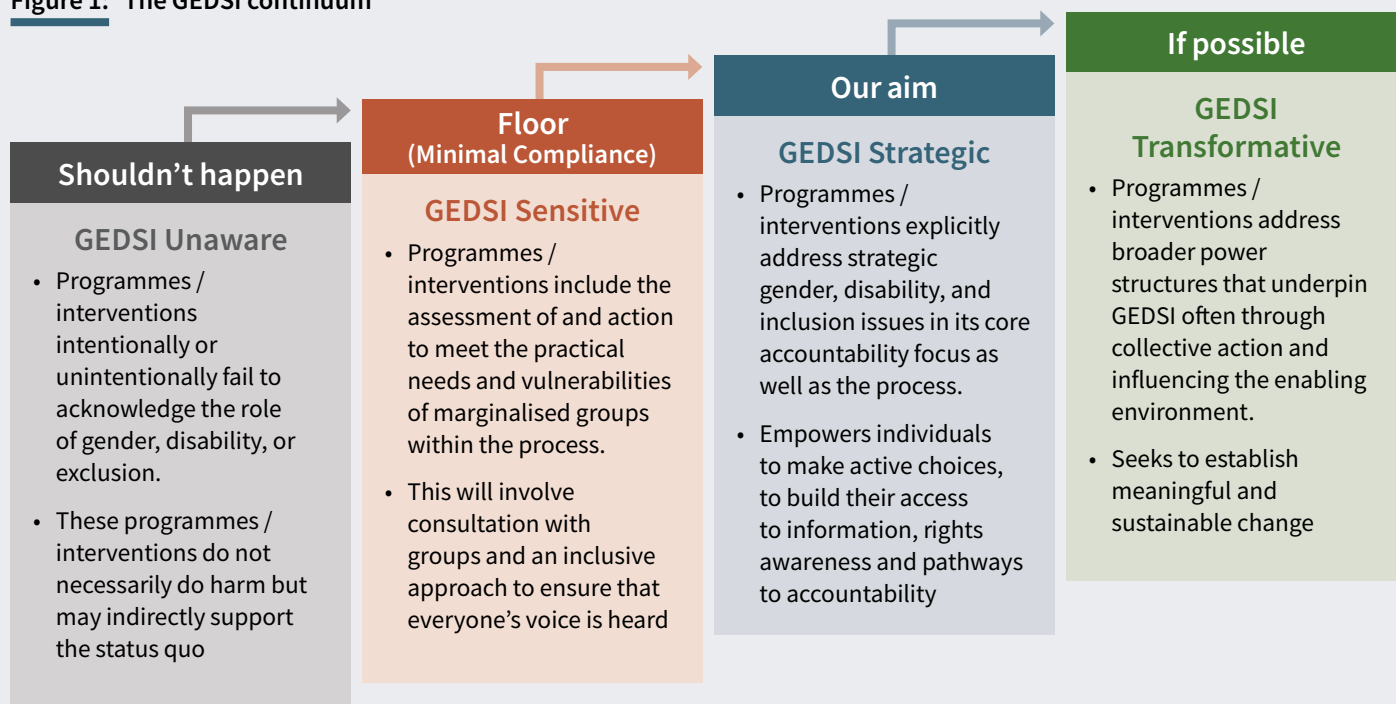
Setting a high level of ambition

From the beginning of the CLEAN Helpdesk programme, GEDSI and its importance for CEN programming has been high on the agenda. During our inception workshop, the GEDSI team briefed consortium members on why GEDSI matters for our work and facilitated a discussion on what level of ambition was appropriate for our programme. All partners have strong organisational commitments to GEDSI and were keen to increase the ambition of the

programme from GEDSI sensitive to GEDSI Strategic, (the level stated in the Business Case).³ Increasing the level of ambition was strongly supported by our programme counterparts in FCDO, who have also held us accountable to this level of ambition.

Using the GEDSI continuum we set our level of ambition as GEDSI Strategic, with an aim to be GEDSI transformative where possible (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The GEDSI continuum



³ The predecessor programme, the Climate Mainstreaming Facility was categorised as 'Gender Unaware'.

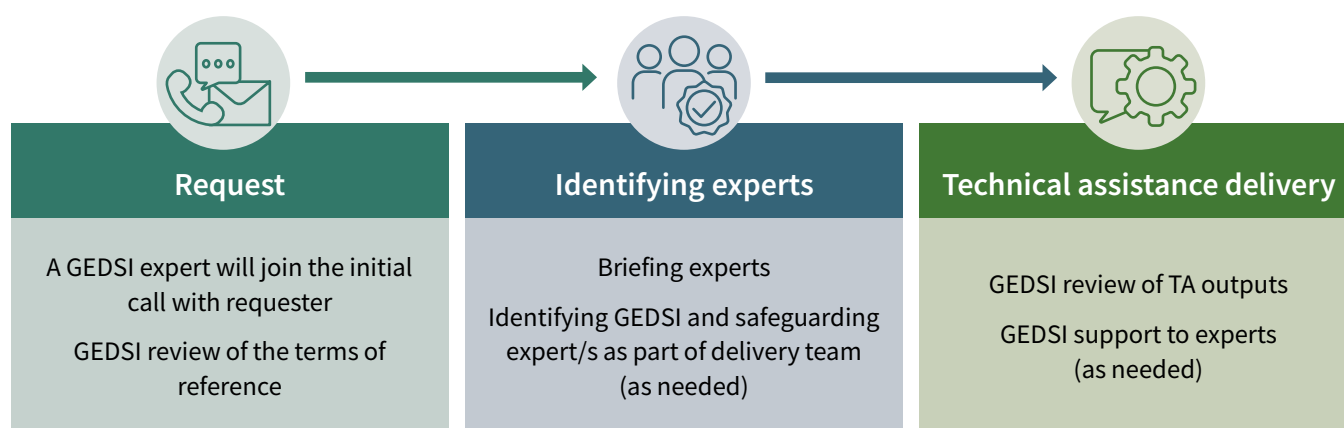


Embedding GEDSI within programme policies and processes

The core function of the CLEAN Helpdesk is to provide CEN TA to UK Government officials. The consortium has integrated a range of actions to ensure a GEDSI lens is applied to all work. When a UK official submits a TA request, they are advised on our GEDSI and safeguarding commitments and invited to consider the links with their request. The GEDSI team are closely involved in building and reviewing Terms of Reference (ToRs), briefing

experts and requesters on key linkages, bringing GEDSI and safeguarding expertise into the TA expert team, and reviewing final products – providing links to resources, and GEDSI content as needed. GEDSI and safeguarding are also mainstreamed through all programme activities, including communications, monitoring, evaluation and learning, and website development (Figure 2).

Figure 2 Our approach to mainstreaming GEDSI through our TA requests – providing guidance at every stage



Making GEDSI relate to everyone's context and role

We tailored our GEDSI and safeguarding training to relate to the CLEAN programme and the range of different workstreams within our programme. This involved using real-life examples that could come up in our day-to-day work. Our training also invited team members to reflect on how power dynamics and GEDSI norms and stereotypes relate to their personal and work lives as a way of helping people truly understand the importance of GEDSI and build their commitment to promoting it.

“The whole team is thinking positively about mainstreaming and have access to the expertise needed to deliver on this (GEDSI).”

CLEAN Helpdesk Team

Having dedicated GEDSI expertise in the team

The CLEAN Helpdesk has a dedicated GEDSI and MEL lead and GEDSI Advisor to support the programme. They provide GEDSI reviews of TA requests and outputs and are on hand to identify opportunities to strengthen GEDSI and safeguarding in team meetings, and to respond to questions raised by team members.

We have a pool of days available for GEDSI and safeguarding expertise, which allows us to be flexible in engaging specific knowledge for strategic inputs, for example, having an equal education and child protection specialist reviewing education outputs. This also supports a more locally-led approach, as we can more easily engage experts from the Global South, particularly those based in the research contexts. This ability to quickly assign GEDSI experts allows us to embed GEDSI earlier in the process, improving not only the level of GEDSI mainstreaming and product turnaround times and adaptability.

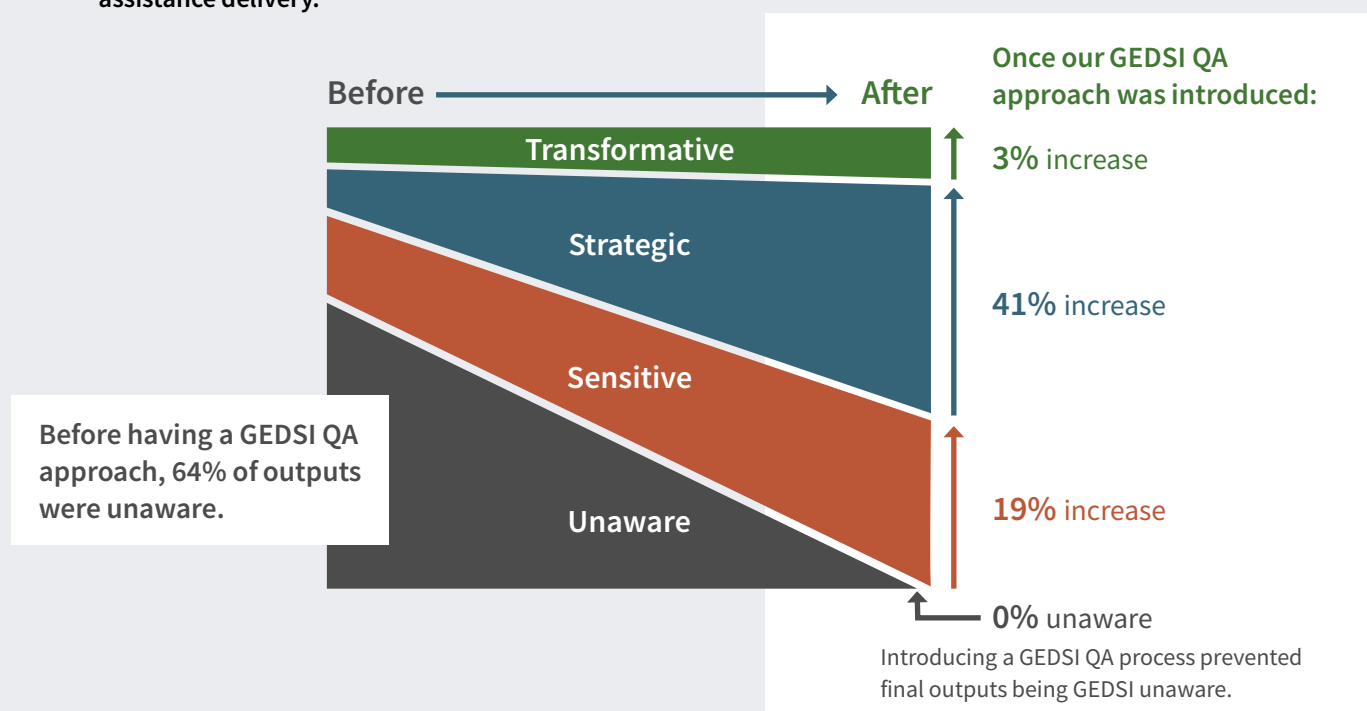
Our successes in mainstreaming GEDSI

GEDSI mainstreaming in our TA requests

Since beginning our GEDSI Quality Assurance (QA) process ([intentionally including GEDSI as a key component of our work](#)), there have been no GEDSI-unaware outputs and there has been an increase in the number of GEDSI strategic and transformative requests, as shown in Figure 3 below⁴. We have worked with experts with limited to no previous experience in researching or writing about GEDSI and

safeguarding issues and supported them to embed these considerations in their work, either by providing guidance and links to relevant resources and data, or by engaging a GEDSI or safeguarding expert to provide expertise and work with them. Alternatively, if the expert has experience with GEDSI and safeguarding issues, the GEDSI team are available to provide support and quality assurance.

Figure 3 Impact of introducing a quality assurance process for mainstreaming GEDSI to the CLEAN Helpdesk technical assistance delivery.



Case study

Integrating GEDSI into a technical assistance request for a diagnostic study on mining and the extraction sector in Jordan.

The experts engaged to conduct this study were technical experts in the mining sector with limited prior exposure to GEDSI. Whilst GEDSI was included in the ToR, the first draft produced was GEDSI unaware. Our GEDSI advisor reviewed the draft report, provided comments on areas to highlight GEDSI and safeguarding risks and opportunities and links to evidence and data sources. This was followed by a discussion with the experts on how they could best approach integrating GEDSI in their report.

Both experts were keen to engage once the entry points and linkages between GEDSI and the mining sector were explained. The final report contains a new section on GEDSI, including an overview of international agreements and regulations on GEDSI and mining, developed by one of the experts, and an analysis of the opportunities for economic inclusion, and risks associated with safeguarding and gender-based violence, developed by the CLEAN Helpdesk's GEDSI advisor.

⁴ Outputs included in the 'before' chart are legacy products of requests received by the predecessor programme, the Climate Mainstreaming Facility, or requests received in inception.

There are high levels of commitment to GEDSI across the programme

SouthSouthNorth have shown strong leadership on the importance of GEDSI, which staff have embraced, driven by their organisational and personal commitments to inclusion. 100% of respondents to the GEDSI Scan survey believe that CLEAN prioritises GEDSI to a great (75%) or moderate (25%) extent, with one respondent writing “it has been a major theme in TA and throughout other areas of our work such as the website and comms.”

GEDSI is mainstreamed throughout all programme activities, including web development and communications

The CLEAN Helpdesk’s web platform has achieved a high level of accessibility compliance – standard [Web Content Accessibility Guidance \(WCAG\) 2.2 AA](#). This goes beyond minimal compliance and aligns with UK digital standards. The team learned that it is essential to design the website with accessibility in mind from the beginning - it lays the foundation for a structure that’s both easier to develop and more straightforward to make accessible. Assigning additional budget and time to improving the accessibility of the website was supported by FCDO programme counterparts who encouraged us to set an example on accessibility through our work.

Our programme branding guidance is designed to be GEDSI-responsive and provides guidance on how to use images and language that present people in empowering ways, and to create accessible communications for people with disabilities.

The MEL framework for the CLEAN Helpdesk is GEDSI-responsive

Having a joint GEDSI and MEL lead position enabled us to consistently integrate GEDSI into our MEL framework, theory of change, and indicators. Measures include ensuring data is collected on improving GEDSI and safeguarding capacity in requester surveys and developing learning case studies on GEDSI integration in technical assistance requests.

The CLEAN Helpdesk takes a zero-tolerance approach to sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment

The programme raises awareness on safeguarding and encourages users and other stakeholders to report any safeguarding concerns. This is emphasised with a banner at the bottom of every page on the website with the title ‘Do you need to report a safeguarding concern?’ providing links to reporting channels and raising awareness.

We developed a comprehensive safeguarding framework for the CLEAN Helpdesk that ensures all consortium partners are aligned in our commitments to safer programming. This was complemented by safeguarding training for all CLEAN staff, which was tailored for the climate sector and Helpdesk activities. In technical assistance requests, our technical experts have also highlighted safeguarding risks and provided recommendations on how to mitigate these risks and create safer programmes.

“The programme demonstrates a positive gender balance within its leadership and is managed through a relatively flat structure that encourages diverse voices and perspectives.”

CLEAN Helpdesk Team





We have created an inclusive environment where people from all backgrounds feel their opinions are valued and GEDSI is openly discussed

100% of CLEAN Helpdesk staff agree that GEDSI is taken seriously and discussed openly in programme meetings to a great extent: GEDSI was described as “a core component” and “always on the agenda”. People feel their opinions are valued and respected and insensitive behaviour “would not be tolerated”. This is complemented by our intentional approach to [building equitable partnerships](#). Going forward, we will continue to make space for discussions around diversity and inclusion, particularly focusing on our work and interactions that are influenced by power dynamics and ongoing work towards racial justice in South Africa in particular, where our lead partner SouthSouthNorth is based.

“The CLEAN team and consortium have been fully brought in to the importance of GEDSI integration across the Helpdesk facility and supported its contributions to the overall impact of the programme.”

CLEAN Helpdesk Team

GEDSI is increasingly becoming the responsibility of all staff members – not just the GEDSI team

100% of survey respondents have read the CLEAN GEDSI Strategy. Staff are clear about how GEDSI relates to their role to a great (42%) or moderate (50%) extent. Some staff, particularly those in more administrative positions, requested more support on how GEDSI related to their role, which we will provide through drop-in sessions.

Visit the [CLEAN Helpdesk website](#) to learn more and access our resource library | info@cleanhelpdesk.org