Social Development Direct

GEDSI Mainstreaming in practice: Safety, Integrity, and Social Justice

SDDirect on GEDSI Mainstreaming:
From Analysis to Lasting Change

GEDSI Mainstreaming in practice: Safety, Integrity, and Social Justice

What this document says in two minutes: This document makes a simple case: **Gender Equality, Disability and Social inclusion (GEDSI) mainstreaming is not an optional extra.** It is a core part of **effective, ethical international development, humanitarian and peacebuilding that protects people and protects investment,** especially when budgets are tight and scrutiny on risk, results and Value for Money is high.

It argues that **mainstreaming works when it changes who can participate safely in development and who benefits from it.** By addressing barriers linked to gender, disability, social identity and power, mainstreaming can strengthen growth and resilience by widening access to services and opportunities, supporting human capital, and **improving the long-term sustainability of investments.** It also warns that **one-size-fits-all programming can miss those most affected by exclusion,** weakening outcomes and allowing value to leak from delivery.

The document sets out an ethical rationale for GEDSI mainstreaming, framed around three practical principles. **Safety:** ignoring GEDSI can create unsafe environments, particularly for people already marginalised, and can undermine "do no harm". **Integrity:** overlooking GEDSI can waste resources, embed exclusion and reduce credibility with communities and partners. **Social justice:** a GEDSI lens is intended to challenge discriminatory norms, shift power and help ensure benefits reach those most likely to be left behind. It emphasises using a GEDSI lens rather than a gender-only lens because intersecting inequalities compound disadvantage.

It also explains what "GEDSI mainstreaming in practice" means. The **document positions mainstreaming as more than training or standalone guidance, and instead as a way of strengthening systems, organisational practice and culture** so that inclusion holds through

political shifts or staff turnover. It highlights that mainstreaming should be politically informed, adapted to context, and focused on long-term capability and sustainability.

A key message is that **GEDSI analysis is the foundation for lasting change, and it should not be treated as a one-off requirement.** The document describes GEDSI analysis as an ongoing process used across the programme cycle to shape design, test assumptions, adapt delivery, manage risks, and embed accountability through monitoring, evaluation and learning. It stresses that **analysis only matters if it leads to practical decisions, such as adapting targeting and consultation approaches, strengthening safeguarding and referral pathways, adjusting staffing or budgets, and anticipating risks like backlash** or exclusion before they cause harm.

The document clarifies that mainstreaming is essential in all programmes, but it is not always sufficient. It argues for a pragmatic "both/and" approach: **integrate GEDSI across programming wherever possible, but use targeted, stand-alone GEDSI interventions when exclusion is acute,** harms are concentrated among particular groups, or deeper shifts in power, norms or institutional practice are required.

Finally, it sharpens what "success" should look like. It suggests that **impact should be judged not only by end outcomes, but by whether institutions and programmes make different decisions because of GEDSI analysis.** Indicators include changes in budget allocations, earlier identification and mitigation of risk, more inclusive participation and feedback mechanisms, and shifts in institutional practices that embed equity and accountability over time. It closes with a warning against tokenism: GEDSI cannot be a box-ticking exercise or a one-off intervention, because meaningful inclusion requires sustained systems change.

1. Why does GEDSI mainstreaming matter?

1.1. Protecting people and protecting investment

Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) mainstreaming is essential for sustainable impact and Value for Money (VfM) in international development, humanitarian and peacebuilding. It is a practical way to protect people and protect investment. This is particularly true in a stretched funding environment where delivery confidence, risk management and demonstrable results matter more than ever.

> **BOX 2: GEDSI Mainstreaming is:**
>
> - ethical
> - key to risk management
> - a means of ensuring delivery confidence / programme performance
> - a powerful tool to embed VfM

Done well, GEDSI mainstreaming strengthens growth and resilience because it changes who can participate in, and benefit from, development. It widens access to labour markets, enterprise and value chains; strengthens human capital; and supports more sustainable fiscal pathways by broadening the future tax base and reducing long-term dependency on international development. Conversely, where programmes take a 'one size fits all' approach, they can end up fitting no one and can therefore allow value to leak from programme delivery.

1.2. An ethical imperative

GEDSI mainstreaming is not only critical to VfM. It is also central to ethical delivery and is supported by a clear set of legal and policy commitments. [1] In practice, GEDSI mainstreaming provides an ethical foundation for programme delivery in three key ways:

- **Safety** | Ignoring GEDSI risks creating unsafe environments, particularly for those already marginalised. Centring GEDSI ensures development and humanitarian work does no harm and actively protects people.
- **Integrity** | Programmes that overlook GEDSI risk wasting resources, entrenching exclusion, and losing credibility with communities and partners.
- **Social justice** | GEDSI challenges discriminatory norms, redistributes power, and ensures benefits reach everyone – so that no one is left behind.

At SDDirect, GEDSI mainstreaming is about tackling root causes, not just surface-level fixes. We use a GEDSI lens rather than a gender-only lens because intersecting inequalities compound disadvantage.

BOX 1: GEDSI and SDDirect – the heart of our work

For over 25 years, Social Development Direct (SDDirect) has delivered politically smart, context-specific GEDSI support to donors, UN agencies, governments, and civil society worldwide. From humanitarian crises to large-scale reform, we embed GEDSI into the policies, systems and programmes that shape people's lives.

SDDirect places GEDSI at the core of all its work (see figure 1), grounding everything we do in an analysis of structural and systemic inequalities and the way in which they shape power across different contexts and institutions over time. In doing this, we are seeking to address the root causes of perpetual poverty and inequality.
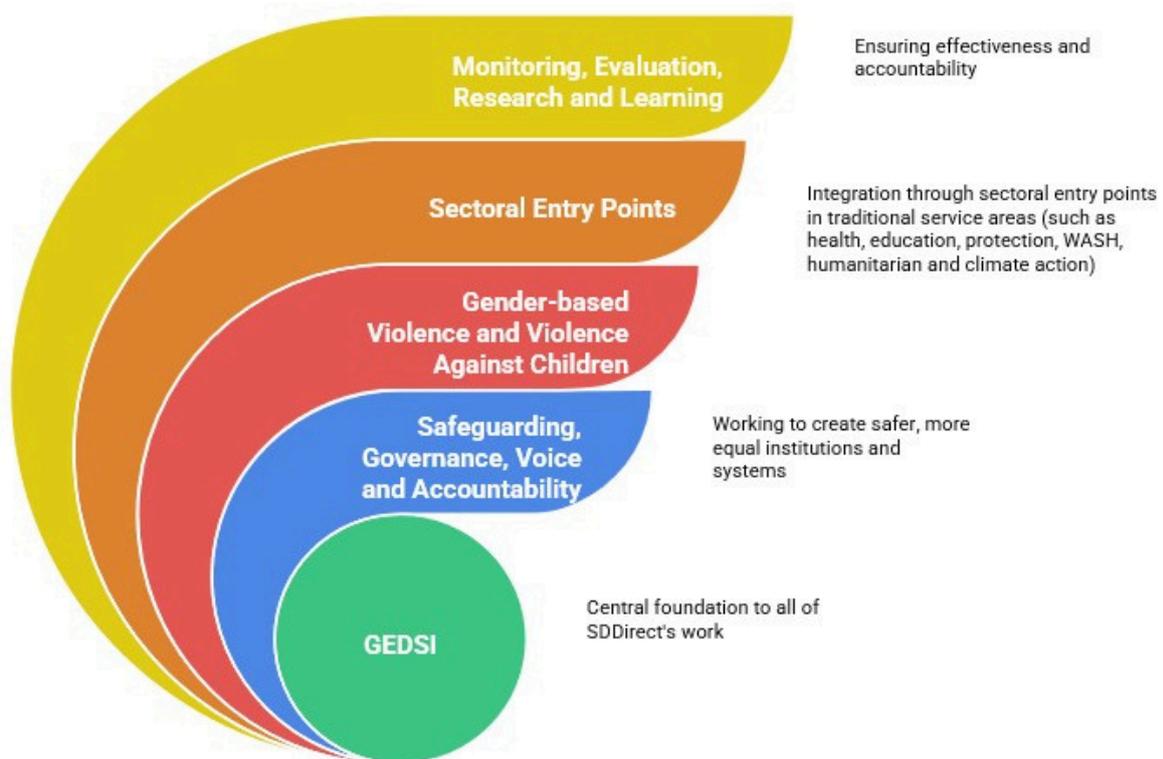

Figure 1: The centrality of GEDSI to SDDirect's work

2. GEDSI mainstreaming in practice

Our approach goes beyond one-off training or skills transfer. We work with partners to strengthen organisations, systems and cultures through long-term accompaniment and mentorship so that inclusive practice outlasts political shifts or staff turnover. This approach aligns with Smart Technical Assistance (Smart TA).

In practice, SDDirect's GEDSI mainstreaming:

- **Builds on strong analysis** – we integrate GEDSI into political economy analysis, humanitarian needs analyses, our Helpdesk delivery, and sector diagnostics to reveal structural inequalities.
- **Targets systems, not individuals** – embedding GEDSI into organisational structures, people, processes and values. We additionally deliver systems change through learning and evaluation work and subsequent recommendations, for example through our evaluation of WHO's Disability Policy or the evaluation of UNICEF's Gender Action Plan and Gender Policy.
- **Works politically** – identifying champions and understanding what enables or blocks change.
- **Focuses on sustainability** – building the long-term capability of partners to lead their own GEDSI agendas.
- **Adapts to context** – recognising that solutions must be locally relevant, sector specific and grounded in lived experience.

2.1. GEDSI analysis: The first step to lasting change

GEDSI analysis is about examining how gender, disability, social identity and power shape people's opportunities and risks. Done well, it identifies structural inequalities and discriminatory norms, pinpoints the environmental, institutional and attitudinal barriers that drive exclusion, and shows where change is possible through both mainstreaming and targeted interventions.

At SDDirect, GEDSI analysis is not a one-off exercise. We use it throughout the project cycle to inform design, test assumptions, adapt delivery, manage risk and track change. Our monitoring, evaluation, research and learning (MERL) expertise helps embed GEDSI into MERL frameworks so progress can be tracked and organisations can be held accountable for change.

A robust GEDSI analysis should shape work from the outset, whether that means designing a strategy for organisational change or delivering a stand-alone intervention in a humanitarian setting. It helps establish the context, set an appropriate and safe level of ambition, and support movement along the GEDSI Responsiveness Continuum (see Figure 2). This helps ensure programmes do not reinforce existing inequalities and, where possible, address their root causes.

What matters most is not only the quality of the analysis, but what it changes in practice. GEDSI evidence should influence real decisions on programme design, delivery and risk management. For example, it may reveal that particular groups face barriers to safe participation, prompting changes to outreach, safeguarding pathways, staffing or budget allocation. It may also identify risks of backlash or exclusion, allowing teams to adjust engagement approaches, sequencing or partnerships before harm occurs.

Our role is to help clients turn GEDSI commitments into operational choices. This can include refining targeting, adapting consultation methods so under-represented groups can participate meaningfully, and strengthening referral, safeguarding and accountability mechanisms. By grounding GEDSI in practical delivery decisions, we help ensure inclusion is treated not as an abstract principle, but as a core part of programme quality, relevance and effectiveness.
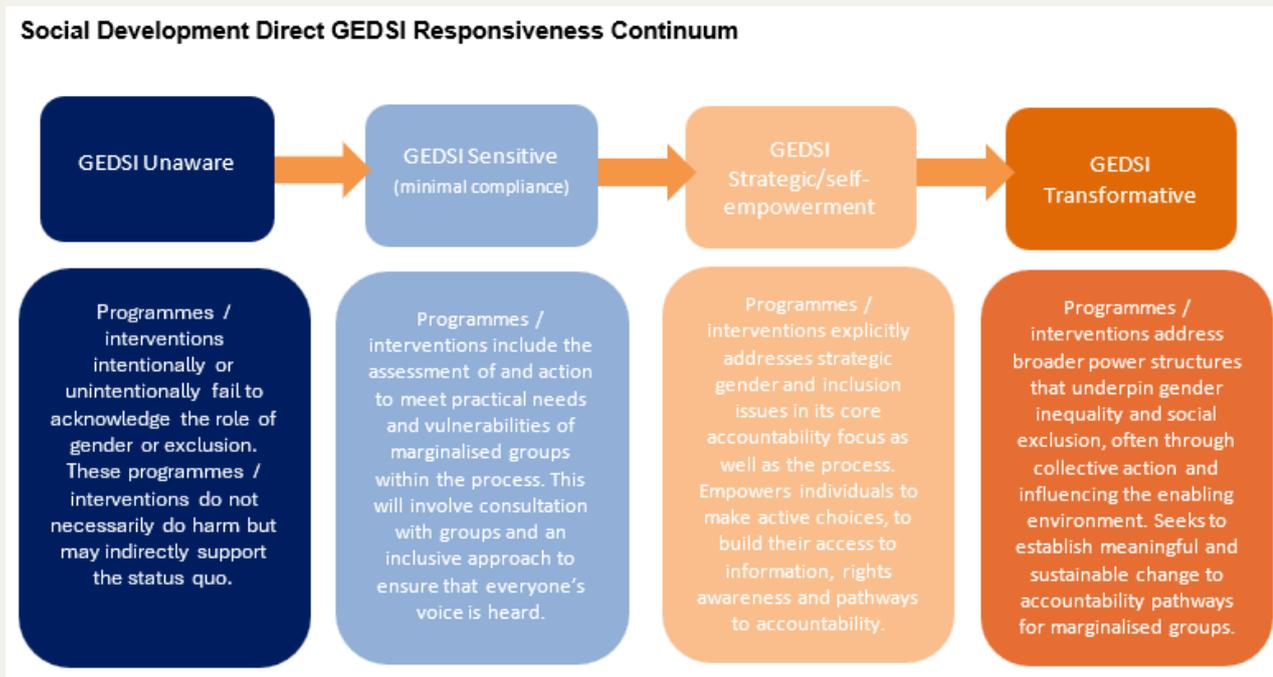
Social Development Direct GEDSI Responsiveness Continuum

GEDSI Unaware	GEDSI Sensitive (minimal compliance)	GEDSI Strategic/self-empowerment	GEDSI Transformative
Programmes / interventions intentionally or unintentionally fail to acknowledge the role of gender or exclusion. These programmes / interventions do not necessarily do harm but may indirectly support the status quo.	Programmes / interventions include the assessment of and action to meet practical needs and vulnerabilities of marginalised groups within the process. This will involve consultation with groups and an inclusive approach to ensure that everyone's voice is heard.	Programmes / interventions explicitly addresses strategic gender and inclusion issues in its core accountability focus as well as the process. Empowers individuals to make active choices, to build their access to information, rights awareness and pathways to accountability.	Programmes / interventions address broader power structures that underpin gender inequality and social exclusion, often through collective action and influencing the enabling environment. Seeks to establish meaningful and sustainable change to accountability pathways for marginalised groups.

Figure 2: GEDSI Responsiveness Continuum

3. What makes effective GEDSI mainstreaming?

From our experience, five lessons stand out:

1. **Think politically** – understand the drivers that keep inequalities in place and identify levers for change.
2. **Get the right people and/or partners** – combine technical skill with lived experience, curiosity, and courage to challenge the status quo.
3. **Invest in relationships within communities and systems where you wish to see change** – co-create analysis and solutions with those most affected and invest in long-term partnerships that support change agents. This builds ownership and sustains progress.
4. **Choose the right approach** – integrate GEDSI into wider work where possible but use stand-alone interventions where urgent rights violations demand it.

5. **Keep GEDSI alive throughout the cycle** – link analysis to theories of change, track progress, build GEDSI relevant accountability mechanisms, and adapt delivery so that inclusion is never sidelined.

Box 3: GEDSI mainstreaming is not

GEDSI mainstreaming is not an optional extra: it is essential for all impactful programming, whether or not equality and inclusion is the central objective. It is not:

   a replacement for targeted or stand-alone GEDSI programming: the two approaches are complementary and can run in parallel.

   limited to sector-specific or thematic interventions: it must be embedded across all programme components, from procurement to community engagement, and from climate change interventions to infrastructure and transport development.

   just "adding a few inclusion-related activities": true mainstreaming integrates GEDSI throughout design, delivery, and MERL.

   a discrete action or add-on: it should be the way the whole programme operates.

3.1. Mainstreaming or targeted GEDSI?

SDDirect supports both GEDSI mainstreaming across all programmes and stand-alone, targeted interventions where deeper or more specific action is needed. Mainstreaming is essential because all programmes should understand and respond to how gender, disability and wider social inequalities shape access, participation, risk and outcomes. However, mainstreaming alone is not always enough. Where exclusion is acute, harms are concentrated among particular groups, or structural barriers require focused attention, targeted GEDSI programming may be necessary. This can include dedicated work on girls' education, disability inclusion, safeguarding, prevention of gender-based violence, or tailored support for groups facing intersecting forms of discrimination.

The choice between mainstreaming and targeted action depends on the nature of the problem, the level of risk and the depth of change required. Where barriers can be addressed through stronger analysis, more inclusive design and better implementation, mainstreaming may be enough. Where exclusion is entrenched, specific groups are being left behind, or programmes need to shift power, norms or institutional practice more deliberately, targeted GEDSI action becomes essential. The GEDSI Responsiveness Continuum (see Figure 2) helps clarify this, showing how programmes move from GEDSI-unaware approaches to sensitive, responsive and ultimately transformational practice.

3.2. Measuring impact

A strong GEDSI approach also depends on how progress is defined and measured. Success is not only about end outcomes, important as these are, but also about whether programmes and institutions are making different decisions as a result of GEDSI analysis. This includes whether resources are allocated differently, risks are identified and mitigated earlier, participation and feedback mechanisms become more inclusive, and institutional practices shift over time to embed greater equity and accountability. These are often the clearest signs that mainstreaming is taking hold in a meaningful way.

This is where MEL becomes particularly important. Effective GEDSI measurement should track not only who benefits, but also how decisions are made, whose voices shape programme adaptation, and whether commitments are reflected in staffing, budgeting, safeguarding, partnership models and accountability systems. By paying attention to these process and institutional shifts, organisations can assess whether GEDSI mainstreaming is improving programme quality in practice, rather than simply being referenced in strategy documents. This moves GEDSI beyond compliance language and towards measurable organisational and programmatic change.

3.3. A note on tokenism

GEDSI mainstreaming cannot be tokenistic or treated as a one-off intervention. It is about transforming systems, tackling root causes and ensuring development and humanitarian work is safe, credible and just.

At SDDirect, we believe meaningful GEDSI work goes far beyond tokenism. The diagram below, drawn from work on the Girls' Education Challenge, shows how universal and context-specific characteristics can intersect to deepen marginalisation. Social exclusion and poverty can intensify these effects further, creating barriers to education in this case, but the same logic applies across other sectors and settings.
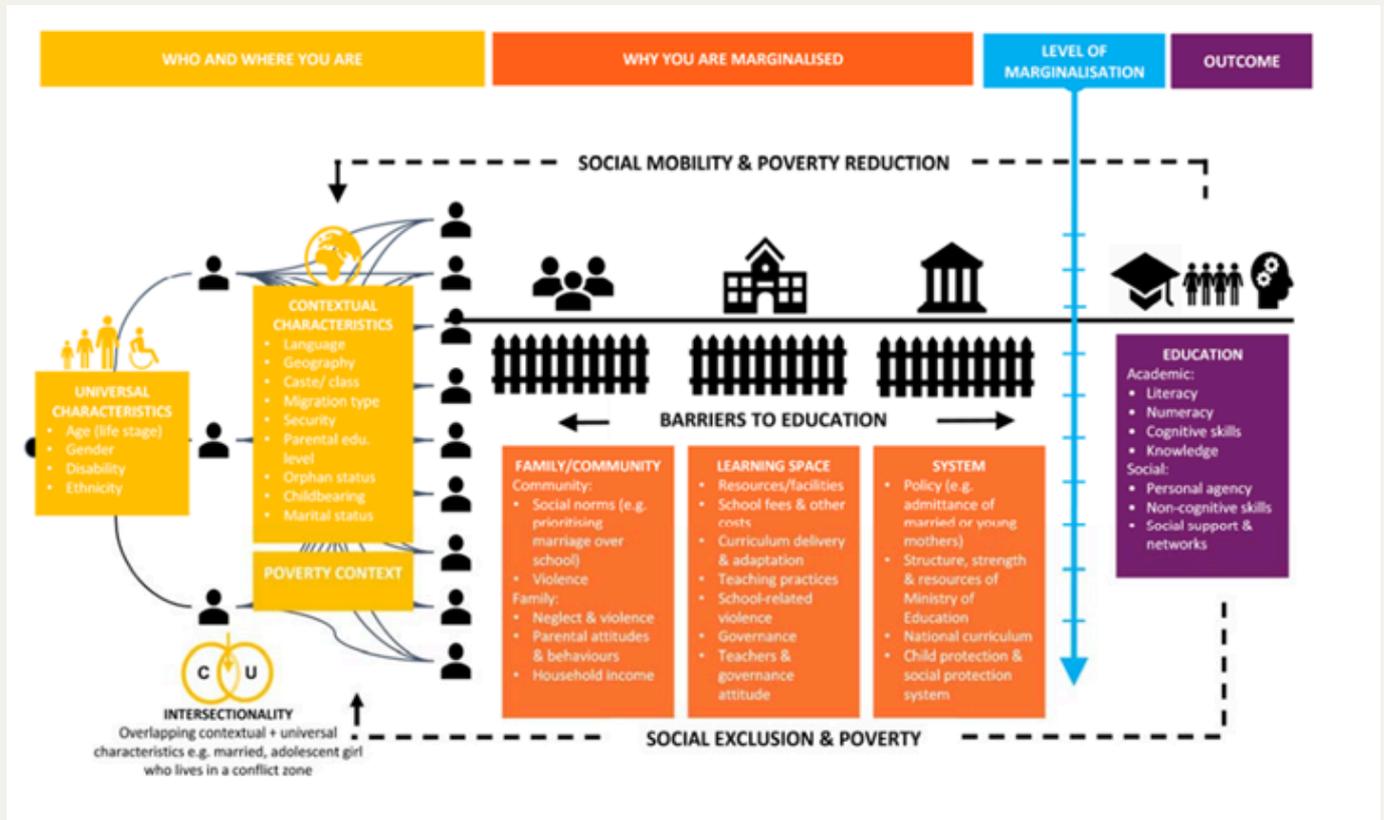
Figure 3: GEDSI and Educational Marginalisation

Box 4: Why work with SDDirect on GEDSI mainstreaming

- Proven track record – decades of context-specific, politically smart GEDSI delivery.
- Intersectional approach – we never separate gender from wider inclusion; we work across both.
- Cross-sector expertise – education, child protection, health, governance, safeguarding, gender-based violence and more.
- Adaptive delivery – specialists in iterative, problem-driven reform processes.
- Trusted relationships – equitable partnerships with governments, multilaterals and civil society.
- Evidence-driven – robust MEL systems to demonstrate real shifts in inclusion.

SDDirect aims to deliver lasting, inclusive change through our work. For case studies demonstrating ways in which we have mainstreamed GEDSI, take a look here.
Here, you will find examples of mainstreaming GEDSI into gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and response programming; in our MERL work; into Women's Economic Empowerment work; within our Inclusive Governance and Climate work; and within our Safeguarding work.

For more information, or to get in touch please contact Kate Bishop, Technical Director, kate.bishop@sddirect.org.uk

Case studies

Case Story | Mainstreaming GEDSI within our Women's Economic Empowerment work

The Private Infrastructure Development Group (PIDG), a GIF Advisory Partner, encourages and mobilises private sector investment in infrastructure in emerging markets and developing economies (EMDEs) to facilitate economic development. It does this by supporting the development and financing of infrastructure projects that are viable for investment by the private sector and public-private partnerships (PPPs) in infrastructure.

From 2020-21, SDDirect worked in partnership with PIDG to provide GESI expertise with the aim to increase the gender empowerment potential of PIDG investments within the context of a sound business case. Drawing on latest evidence and best practice, the team reviewed five PIDG investment opportunities for GuarantCo and InfraCo Asia in sectors including digital and energy, providing advice on their:

- Gender empowerment potential, reviewing against the PIDG Gender Ambition Framework
- Gender business case, including providing relevant good practice examples
- Implementation plans for the PIDG company/project sponsor based on the business case

Case Story | Mainstreaming GEDSI in our Inclusive Governance work

The FCDO RIVA GEDSI TA and Grants Facility (2025-2028) in Nepal seeks to empower women, girls, and marginalised groups to claim their rights, strengthen their agency, and participate meaningfully in inclusive policymaking. This is done through the provision of flexible and catalytic grants, and a technical assistance (TA) facility. The programme supports an enabling environment in Nepal, promoting exchange and learning between civil society actors to support movement building and collective action.

The programme is implemented by SDDirect as the prime with Plan International UK and Nepal. The programme's geographic focus is on Kathmandu Valley and Lumbini and Madhesh provinces. The demand led TA Facility is open to the British Embassy Kathmandu, its implementing partners, CSOs and government. TA is provided through written deliverables, training, technical reviews of existing documentation (e.g. analyses, business cases, logframes, ToCs, strategies, etc) and troubleshooting real-time issues in discussions and calls.

TA includes working with FCDOsGovernance CoE to develop governance and inclusion scans that will be piloted in Nepal through RIVA, support to GEDSI/political economy analyses and strategies, GEDSI mainstreaming training to implementing partners, and to FCDO cadres (e.g. SDA cadre), undertaking a GEDSI synthesis of BEK's portfolio to inform their theory of change on inclusion and strengthen the coherence and narrative around GEDSI.

Case Story | Mainstreaming GEDSI within our MERL work

SDDirect was part of a multidisciplinary consortia delivering the Global Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (GMEL) service for the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF). GMEL supported the Joint Funds Unit (JFU) to develop and implement MEL systems and processes that meet the demands of programming in fragile and conflict affected contexts and generates and synthesises evidence for policy and decision-making.

SDDirect's role in GMEL was to lead the meaningful integration of GEDSI across GMEL interventions aimed to strengthen the CSSF fund-wide MEL ecosystem. Amongst other deliverables, SDDirect's GEDSI leadership resulted in:

- A GEDSI marker to monitor the fund compliance with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD DAC) gender equality policy marker, which supported projects to meaningfully mainstream GEDSI into their projects and MEL
- Guidance and principles for incorporating GEDSI in Theories of Change and Results Frameworks
- Guidance to conduct intersectional gender analysis in conflict affected settings
- Safeguarding and GEDSI principles for CSSF evaluations
- Principles for addressing gender and social bias in data analytics

For more information about our work in the GMEL for CSSF, please see here.

Case Story | Mainstreaming GEDSI within our work to prevent and respond to GBV

SDDirect takes a fundamentally GEDSI transformative approach to all our work in GBV, recognising that violence is underpinned by power imbalances and gender inequality, and only systemic shifts in who holds power and how it is used will reduce the prevalence of violence against women and girls in all their diversity.

The Malawi Violence Against Women and Girls Prevention and Response, or Tithetse Nkahza! (Let's End Violence!) Programme in Malawi, for which SDDirect was the technical lead, embedded GEDSI throughout the programme. Within the expectation that the programme operates at the transformative end of the GEDSI Responsiveness Continuum with respect to gender equality and women's rights, the programme set itself what it considered a more realistic goal of strategic engagement on all forms of social inclusion, with the aim of adapting to transformative ways of working toward the end of the programme. Tithetze Nkhanza! developed and delivered a GESI strategy, a set of GESI markers, and a range of learning products about embedding GESI transformation, particularly Disability Inclusion, within a GBV programme. Regrettably the programme was closed prematurely due to the UK aid budget cuts in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, so the efforts to reduce the prevalence of violence against women in all their diversity were not rigorously assessed.

The programme design, however, has been scaled up and is being delivered by a consortium of WROs in Malawi with funding from the What Works 2 programme, with a continued focus on reaching women with disabilities. The accompanying randomised control trial is designed to determine whether integration of GEDSI into the programme yields results. More information is available here.

Case Story | Mainstreaming GEDSI within our Safeguarding work

The Safeguarding Resource and Support Hub (RSH) is an FCDO-funded, global support mechanism for CSOs to strengthen their approaches to addressing SEAH perpetrated by those associated with aid.

In May 2022, RSH launched an Eastern European Hub (RSH EE), funded by the Disasters Emergency Committee. The hub aimed to strengthen the safeguarding of refugees fleeing Ukraine, overwhelmingly women and children by working with CSOs proving support to refugees in Moldova, Poland and Romania. RSH quickly established the need for targeted GEDSI Strategic interventions focussing on disability inclusion, SOGIESC inclusion and Roma inclusion. These groups were strategically targeted due to the demographic profile of the refugees and the political and social history that exacerbated safeguarding risks for people with disabilities, members of the SOGIESC community and members of the Roma community. The Hub looked inward, creating a culture and capabilities within the team to meaningfully deliver on these GEDSI objectives, and contracting specialist expertise. Outwardly, they conducted research on safeguarding risks for people with disabilities and refugees with various sexual and gender identities, developed contextualised resources such as the Disability Inclusion series and the Roma community safeguarding series, and ensured documents and guidance were translated including into Romani and four different sign languages. They also facilitated roundtables to bring organisations together to raise awareness and address the specific safeguarding risks for the SOGIESC community.

Given the relevance of RSH EE's work, over 6,300 resources were downloaded from the website, and 100% of the CSOs engaged by the hub were satisfied with the support provided, while 91% felt that the support was tailored to their needs.

[1] For example, Leaving no one behind (LNOB) is the central, transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs and multiple donors have legal commitments to mainstream and advance GEDSI within their funding streams, including the UK through the provisions made within the International Development (Gender Equality) Act (2014), which states: In section 1 (development assistance), after subsection (1): "(1A)Before providing development assistance under subsection (1), the Secretary of State shall have regard to the desirability of providing development assistance that is likely to contribute to reducing poverty in a way which is likely to contribute to reducing inequality between persons of different gender."
(3)In section 3 (humanitarian assistance), after the existing provision (which becomes subsection (1)): "(2)Before providing assistance under subsection (1), the Secretary of State shall have regard to the desirability of providing assistance under that subsection in a way that takes account of any gender-related differences in the needs of those affected by the disaster or emergency."
[1] Booth, R., Mony, J., (2018), Thematic Review Understanding and Addressing Educational Marginalisation, Girls' Education Challenge