

Embedding gender:

Women's Economic Empowerment within Market Systems Development (MSD) programs

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Executive Summary

Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) is now recognised as both a critical enabler and outcome of poverty reduction and successful economic development. WEE is one of the three pillars of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) Gender equality and women's empowerment policy. This knowledge-exchange brief discusses how WEE has been integrated into Market Systems Development (MSD) programs.

It explores how MSD programs such as the Market Development Facility (MDF) have, from an initially low base, had considerable successes in formally incorporating WEE into their interventions and monitoring. The brief highlights some of the key challenges faced when trying to integrate WEE and suggests ways to overcome them. It concludes with findings from recent work MDF has undertaken on women's agency, arguing that MSD programs diagnostic approaches are able to offer unique insights in this area that could be adopted by other programs.

This knowledge-exchange brief is part of a series developed by the DFAT funded Market Development Facility (MDF). The briefs reflect a range of perspectives from roundtable discussions facilitated by MDF at DFAT in Canberra in October 2018 as part of MDF's learning agenda. The briefs acknowledge the diversity of policy perspectives on MSD and incorporate examples and lessons learned from MDF and other MSD programs. The learning agenda aims to support learning and information sharing by MDF, one of DFAT's largest, most sectorally diverse and geographically dispersed MSD programs. Learning Agenda sessions are aimed at deepening understanding of the value, application and complementarities of MSD as well as other private sector approaches in complex economic and political environments.

Purpose

WEE, as a subcomponent of women's empowerment is central to the Australian aid program. Both through DFAT Posts and the Gender Equality Fund, which supported MDF in Timor-Leste, MSD programming is increasingly focused on six key domains of WEE: i. women's access to assets; ii. access services and opportunities; iii. gendered social norms;

iv. economic advancement; v. changes in decision making; and vi. changes in women's functions and workloads. MSD programs such as MDF are well equipped to both make and monitor contributions to advancing gender equality within these six domains. There remains however considerable scope for many programs involved in economic development, including other MSD programs to better integrate WEE.

MDF has developed a framework for women's economic empowerment. It has also undertaken innovative work to move MSD program's understanding of impact beyond the traditional goal of increased income and towards quality issues related to empowerment and agency. For programs to engage with WEE they need to challenge the status quo, think and do differently. WEE requires dedicated effort and dedicated resources towards WEE. MDF's experiences of the development and integration of its WEE approach offers relevant lessons for both MSD and broader aid programming.

Analysis

Economic development programs that ignore gender and women's economic empowerment have a high risk of exacerbating the entrenched discriminatory status-quo. The reality is that socio-economic changes that are 'gender-neutral' are rare. Gender blindness often results in failing to engage women in areas where they should have been engaged, while further shifting power dynamics towards men. This in turn can prevent women from fulfilling their potential, or worse, weaken their position as the gender gap expands and men move even further ahead through better information, connections and opportunities.

MSD programs such as MDF have proven that gender equality and Women's Economic Empowerment outcomes can be effectively pursued through partnership with the private sector. MSD programs build networks with market system actors – private, public, community – and work to catalyse changes to the way that a particular market functions. MSD programs work on the principle that women are already vital actors in markets, but that women's roles are often hidden/less visible and they face different, often greater, constraints to benefit from economic growth. MSD partnerships with business are always based on sound market analysis and opportunities for sector growth, but the program integrates WEE as an overarching principle from the very beginning of intervention design. MDF also actively seeks out innovations that can help overcome barriers to gender equality. Critically these innovations need to have a sound business case so as not to compromise sustainability.

A key starting point for thinking about WEE on MSD programs is recognising that income is not necessarily equally shared within a household or community. Access relates to a woman's ability to tap in to opportunities, goods, information, and networks, while agency relates to their ability to make and act on economic decisions. For economic development

programs, 'access' is the traditional entry point, while 'agency' has proven more complex to understand, monitor and change. Both access to economic resources and agency are mutually reinforcing and present different entry points for creating economic advancement and changing social norms. In addition, non-financial benefits such as reduced workload, increased satisfaction and social recognition play a central role in women's well-being and can impact access and agency. Understanding and measuring all these components is an important part of understanding WEE and effectively designing interventions.

MSD programs such as MDF have found that the greatest improvements in women's access and agency has not necessarily been through partnerships with women owned industries. Often it is the degree of concentration of existing or potential female workers within the industry that determines scale of impact. Although it is often empowering for a woman to be at the point of transaction, interventions which focus on women who play a support role in economic activity – not typically at the point of transaction – can also have a significant positive impact.

Integrating WEE requires both specific resourcing, as well as an understanding that it is the responsibility of all staff. In the case of MDF, whilst there are short term gender advisers and an overarching Director of Quality and Inclusion, it is the gender focal points, who are both business advisers and results measurement advisers who ensure that there is a consistent approach to WEE across all MDF interventions. The focal points create a sense of shared responsibility amongst all staff which is further supported through the results monitoring system. MDF developed its Women's Economic Empowerment Framework in 2015, which provided a diagnostic approach and set clear guidance for how the program would systematically scan its portfolio through a WEE lens. The final component of mainstreaming WEE is fostering a culture that celebrates WEE as a central part of program activities. In MDF this has been done through clear senior management buy-in to the WEE agenda, strategy and approach and active public celebration of WEE successes within teams.

Conclusions

Women's Economic Empowerment requires detailed analysis and considered implementation. MSD programs such as MDF are increasingly unpacking the various elements of WEE and delivering significant results. Through use of diagnostic tools and an institutional focus on WEE it is possible to get beyond presumptions and normative views of what WEE should look like, to the reality of women's lives. This provides a more powerful set of tools for delivering real and sustainable impact. Understanding agency and access are key components of this. All economic growth programs should be



encouraged to reflect on the way they are impacting agency/access and to question the idea that women led businesses always deliver the greatest impact for women.



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