The Role of Local Actors in Gender Responsive and Inclusive Social Protection Systems

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AHN	Asal Humanitarian Network
ASAL	Arid and Semi-Arid Lands
BHA	Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance
CBO	Community based organisation
CCS	Cash Consortium of Sudan
CDC	Community Development Committees/Councils
CLRP	Community Recovery and Livelihoods Programme
CRGs	Community Resilience Groups
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
CT-OCV	The Cash Transfer for Orphans and Vulnerable Children
DfA	De-facto Authority
ECHO	European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
ERRs	Emergency Response Rooms
ESSN	Emergency Crisis and COVID-19 Response Social Safety Net Project
EU	European Union
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
GESI	Gender equality and social inclusion
GRISP	Gender-responsive and inclusive social protection
HAC	Humanitarian Aid Commission
HGSM	Home-Grown School Meals Programme
HH	Household
IDP	Internally displaced persons
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
ILO	International Labour Organisation
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
KII	Key informant interview
LNGO	Local non-governmental organisation
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
MCCT+	Mother and Child Cash Transfer Plus (MCCT+) programme
MEAL	Monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MMSP	Mobile money service provider
MoSA	The Ministry of Social Affairs
MOU	Memorandum of understanding
MPCA	Multi-purpose cash assistance
MSP	Money service provider
NDA	National Disability Allowance
NPC	The National Planning Commission
NPR	Nepalese rupee
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
NSNP	Kenya National Safety Net Programme
NSPS	The National Social Protection Strategy
NTTP	National Poverty Targeting Programme
ODA	Official development assistance
OPDs	Organisations of persons with disabilities
PMEP	Prime Minister Employment Programme
PMT	Proxy means test
PWDs	Persons with disabilities

RBA	Resilience Building Afghanistan Project
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SADDD	Sex, age, and disability disaggregated data
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
SFSP	Sudan Family Support Programme
SHGs	Self Help Groups
SP	Social protection
SSA	Social Security Allowances
STAAR	Social Protection Technical Assistance, Advice and Resources
UCT	Unconditional Cash Transfer
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VSLAs	Village Savings and Loan Associations
WASDA	Wajir South Development Association
WB	World Bank
WFP	World Food Programme
WLOs	Women led organisations
WO	Women’s organisations

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Study Context

Social protection systems have the potential to lift the most marginalised - including women and girls - out of poverty, address social exclusion, and reduce vulnerability to shocks and stresses. Yet, social protection continues to fall short in advancing gender equality and achieving transformative change; most often positioning women and marginalised groups as passive recipients rather than decision makers and agents of change. To close gender gaps and address the root causes of exclusion and poverty, social protection must be shaped by, and responsive to, the priorities of those most affected. This means engaging local actors who possess the knowledge, skills, and lived experience to drive more effective and transformative outcomes. Although a body of evidence underscores the necessity of shifting agency to local actors, this largely sits outside the social protection sector, with only anecdotal examples documenting the specific contributions of local actors to more responsive, inclusive and therefore effective social protection.

Study Purpose

The study assessed the role of diverse local actors in gender-responsive social protection systems across six countries (Afghanistan, Kenya, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nepal, and Sudan). It identified barriers limiting their engagement and explored opportunities for strengthening their agency and leadership. By examining the roles and agency of diverse local actors across different social protection processes (**framing, design, delivery,** and **learning)**, the study offers evidence-based recommendations for donors and international actors to foster locally led, gender-responsive, and inclusive social protection.

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was adopted, including:

- **A desk review** of the global literature and the social protection ecosystem in the six deep dive countries including policy frameworks, programmes and stakeholders.
- **120 in-country key informant interviews (KIIs)** with government actors, local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations (CBOs), gender and social inclusion (GESI) actors, and international actors.
- **118 surveys with local and international actors** to assess the perceived agency of local actors in different social protection functions.

Current Roles of Local Actors in Gender-responsive and Inclusive Social Protection

- **National governments** generally lead social protection policy formulation especially in stable contexts, but subnational governments are mainly implementers and have limited decision-making power to shape priorities.
- **International actors** often dominate programme framing and design in crisis contexts, sometimes bypassing governments due to governance or security issues.
- **Local NGOs (LNGOs)** are usually consulted on targeting or beneficiary identification but are rarely involved in strategic decision making or programme governance, especially in internationally-driven programmes.
- **GESI actors** have a limited formal role in official decision-making but play key advocacy and awareness raising roles on entitlements and primarily serve as delivery partner in GESI-focused or crisis-response programmes.
- **Community-based organisations (CBOs)** are typically excluded from policy framing and programme design but are instrumental in last-mile delivery (supporting outreach, registration, and informal monitoring). In crisis contexts, informal community initiatives such as Emergency Response Rooms and Mutual Aid Groups are pivotal in identifying priorities and mobilising local resources.

- **Private sector actors** facilitate payments to beneficiaries, especially where government or NGO reach is limited, with increasing relevance as delivery becomes more digitised.

Potential Roles of Local Actors in Gender-responsive and Inclusive Social Protection

- **National governments** could institutionalise subnational government engagement in programme design for better adaptation to local contexts and priorities.
- **Subnational governments** could co-lead programme framing, needs assessments, and monitoring making programmes more relevant and accountable.
- **LNGOs** have potential to move from implementers to co-leaders in policy framing and governance, convening community consultations and translating grassroots needs into policies and locally appropriate programmes.
- **CBOs** could transition to formalised partners, framing priorities through grassroots consultation, increasing reach and inclusion in programme design and delivery, and co-leading feedback and accountability mechanisms centred on community voices.
- **GESI actors** could play a central role in ensuring not just inclusion but true transformation via programme framing (e.g., identifying vulnerabilities, shaping priorities); co-designing programmes (e.g., influencing reach, targeting, entitlements, and transfer processes); leading on policy advocacy, awareness raising and peer learning; challenge social norms; and defining gender-responsive indicators and feedback systems.
- **Private sector actors** could further enhance benefit delivery through innovative, accessible, and digital payment channels
- **International actors** could focus on enabling and supporting local leadership, providing resources and technical support whilst ceding decision-making and leadership to local actors and helping institutionalise their roles.

Barriers for Strengthening the Engagement of Local Actors

Despite their potential, local actors face significant barriers to full participation and meaningful engagement across social protection systems:

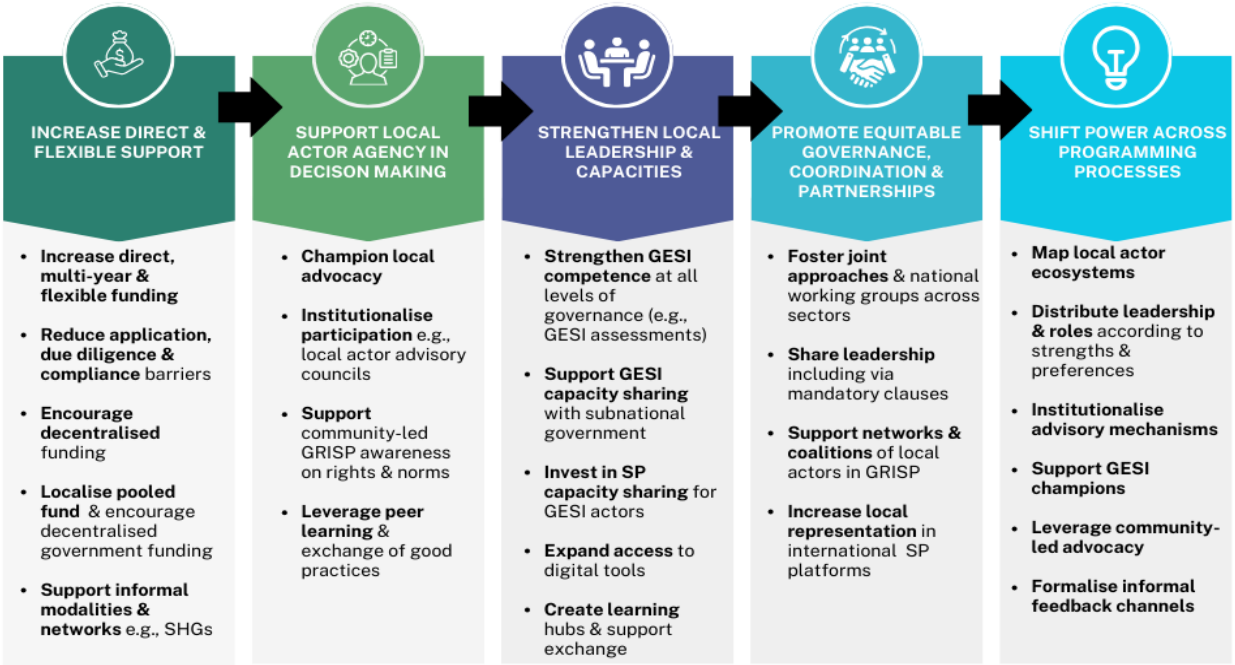
- **Political and governance constraints.** Restrictive government policies (e.g., Afghanistan's policies, which are systematically excluding women from decision-making spaces; and Myanmar's NGO registration law, which is limiting local actors' ability to operate independently); competing priorities; unstable governance structures (e.g., in Sudan and Lebanon), which are creating fragmentation, weak coordination; and political and cultural resistance to gender and disability inclusion (e.g., Kenya and Sudan) are limiting local actor participation.
- **Reliance on indirect, short-term funding.** Donor-driven, project-based funding channelled via international intermediaries often bypasses local actors including women's organisations in favour of larger INGOs. This hinders long-term social protection planning, organisational strengthening, reaching those most in need, deepening expertise and specialised skills, and meaningful GESI integration.
- **Fragmented partnerships and coordination barriers**. INGO-dominated ecosystems, short-term partnerships with GESI actors and piecemeal involvement (limiting their ability to provide sustained support for long-term GESI outcomes); and a lack of collective action amongst GESI actors has weakened coherent and sustained support for transformative outcomes.
- **Capacity gaps.** GESI actors are confined to implementation roles and many, especially at the grassroots, lack structured organisational capacity and technical expertise including in SP policy framing, programme design, monitoring and evaluation, as well as limited access to funding and formal coordination platforms. Conversely, government actors experience GESI capacity gaps including the collection and use of disaggregated data, and the integration of gender and disability assessments into decision making.

Opportunities for Strengthening Local Actor Roles

Despite these challenges, key informants identified several opportunities to strengthen local actor engagement.

- ✓ **Advocate for inclusive policies.** Identify and support government GESI champions; institutionalise consultation with GESI actors in policy development; integrate global GESI standards; integrate informal social mechanisms (e.g., mutual aid groups); and promote GESI-specific indicators;
- ✓ **Support capacity sharing.** Support peer-to-peer learning on GESI; provide capacity strengthening for subnational government actors on GESI; and support access to digital tools.
- ✓ **Build long term partnerships and coordination mechanisms.** Shift from INGO-dominated models to more equitable partnership; foster sustained coordination and the inclusion of GESI actors in policy forums, networks and coordination platforms; and support coordination between GESI actors.
- ✓ **Reduce reliance on indirect funding to increase local actor autonomy.** Increase funding quantity and quality for local actors; and diversity financing channels and modalities including direct to government, GESI actors, and to informal social protection mechanisms (e.g. Mutual Aid Groups);
- ✓ **Challenge social norms.** Link social protection with gender and disability rights frameworks; invest in community-led awareness campaigns; and integrate Self Help Groups into national systems as a key vehicle for sharing information, inclusion, and challenge social norms.

Key Recommendations



- ➢ **Increase direct, flexible, multi-year funding for local actors** including GESI actors to strengthen their leadership and agency in gender-responsive social protection whilst simplifying application, compliance, and due diligence processes; and increase support for localised pooled funding mechanisms and informal, community-driven social protection mechanisms (e.g., Self Help Groups).
- ➢ **Institutionalise local actor agency in policy framing and decision making** ensuring diverse local actors contribute beyond implementation by institutionalising their co-leadership/leadership (including in framing objectives, developing targeting criteria, and resource allocation) and championing local advocacy.

- **Strengthen local capacities** in leadership and technical areas including through targeted support and peer-to-peer learning on GESI, the use of digital tools, financial management, monitoring and evaluation, and creating learning hubs to support collaboration and exchange.
- **Promote local governance, coordination, and partnerships** via cross-sectoral mechanisms, coordination across GESI actors, between government and non-governmental actors, and through mandatory co-leadership provisions in donor funding agreements.
- **Shift power dynamics** by mapping the local actor ecosystem and assigning roles according to comparative strengthens (following a separation of function); establishing inclusive advisory decision-making structures all levels; supporting community-led advocacy and awareness on rights; and formalising informal feedback mechanisms.

The study concludes by highlighting the untapped potential of local actors, particularly GESI-focused organisations, in gender-responsive and inclusive social protection systems. Whilst local actors currently play a critical role in last-mile delivery, their current exclusion from policy formulation and decision making limits the reach, impact and sustainability of social protection programmes. Unlocking the full potential of local actors and leveraging their knowledge, skills, and capacities, will require a systemic shift in donor policies and practices, funding modalities, social norms and power dynamics, alongside more equitable partnerships, increased coordination, and investment in capacity sharing. Only by addressing these barriers, will local actors transition from peripheral implementers to central leaders and architects of social protection systems that are more effective, inclusive, responsive, equitable, connected, timely, and sustainable.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Study Context

The overall aim of this study was to identify opportunities for strengthening the engagement of local actors in gender-responsive and inclusive social protection. By assessing the current and potential roles in social protection of diverse local actors[1] – including gender and social inclusion (GESI) actors – the barriers to strengthening their roles, and ways to enhance their roles, this study builds the evidence base for enabling local actors to transition from peripheral implementers to key architects of more effective and inclusive social protection systems.

Social protection systems are designed to provide support to individuals and families who are at risk from poverty, social exclusion, shocks, and stresses. The aim of social protection is to ensure that all members of a society have access to essential services, resources, and opportunities; promoting their well-being and protecting them from poverty and hardship (IDS, 2019). Access to social protection is a human right, and a powerful tool to support marginalised groups[2] by addressing the underlying drivers of inequality. A systematic review of 70 studies on social protection programmes in low-income and middle-income countries found that social protection initiatives can have a more pronounced impact on women and girls compared to men and boys (Perera *et al*., 2022). For example, social assistance programmes have been found to enhance women's labour participation, savings, investments, and use of healthcare services and contraceptive (ibid). Similarly, labour market programmes have been shown to improve women's employment rates, asset ownership, and earning capacity. Furthermore, well designed and implemented programmes that mainstream disability inclusion can ensure accessibility alongside disability-specific social protection programmes that protect the dignity of people with disabilities (STAAR, 2024).

Yet social protection continues to fall short in realising – and investing – in the potential for promoting gender equality and transformative change for the poorest and most marginalised communities. Notably, social protection is not reaching those most in need including informal workers, unpaid workers, unpaid care and domestic workers (STAAR, 2024). Coverage for women of working age, children and adolescents remains low (Holmes *et al.,* 2019; IFRC, 2020); despite being disproportionately impacted by crises (Selby, 2021). For example, two billion women and girls worldwide lack access to any form of social protection, underscoring significant gaps in current systems (IFRC, 2020; UN Women, 2024). This is attributed to factors such as lower labour force participation, higher levels of part-time and informal work, gender pay gaps, and a disproportionate share of unpaid care work (ILO,2021).

Further, the discourse on social protection and gender equality centres on women and other marginalised groups as "vulnerable" and passive recipients of social protection rather than decision makers and agents of change. For example, the focus is on women as mothers and caregivers rather than their diverse roles including leading and delivering social protection systems (Holmes *et al.,* 2019). As a result, the framing, design, and delivery of social protection strategies and initiatives is neither gender-responsive nor inclusive. For example, only 20 percent of social protection measures implemented during COVID-19 were identified as "gender sensitive" (Gavrilovic *et al*). Without integrating women's leadership and agency in decision making and centering on the priorities of the most marginalised, social protection systems are unable to recognise and respond to gendered needs and address the root causes of gender inequality and discrimination (UNDP, 2024).

To address the drivers of gender inequality and poverty, and close gender gaps, social protection systems and processes must be gender-responsive and/or gender-transformative. This requires

[1] This study broadly defines local actors as individuals, community-based organisations (CBOs) or structures (e.g., Self Help Groups), businesses, institutions, networks, local non-governmental organisations (LNGOs) including gender and social inclusion (GESI) representative organisations, and national and subnational governments; based, leading and operating from within the local context of reference, subject to local laws, and whose origins are in the Global South and activities centred on local communities.

[2] Including women and girls facing intersecting discrimination because of disability, LGBTQI+ status, race, or ethnicity.

the application of a gender lens to key social protection policies, systems, processes (i.e., framing, design, delivery, learning), and component activities.[3] This allows a deeper understanding of individuals' exposure to risk and vulnerability, which is foundational for supporting gender-responsive and inclusive programme design and delivery (Camilleti, 2020). Failure to apply a gender lens and integrate analysis of gender dynamics and inequalities can mean that social protection programme design and delivery modalities, financing and governance mechanisms, can exacerbate inequalities (UNICEF, 2020).

At the same time, there is emerging evidence that local actors – including gender actors – can play a key role in delivering more cost efficient and effective, gender-responsive, equitable, and inclusive humanitarian and development action (The Share Trust, 2020)**.** A seminal 2024 study by the Share Trust found that local intermediaries can deliver programming that is 32% more cost efficient than international intermediaries, highlighting a key imperative to shift agency to local actors. The growing evidence base underpins increasing commitment in international and national normative frameworks to strengthen the leadership of local actors.[4] Concomitantly, there has been increased focus on the role of gender and social inclusion (GESI) focused local actors in locally led action. To date, however, this discussion has largely taken place outside of the social protection sector.

Notably, the body of literature focusing specifically on the role of local women's organisations and other local representative organisations in social protection systems, processes, and outcomes, is more limited. Insufficient attention has been paid in the social protection literature to the role of representative actors beyond policymakers and implementers with a mandate for social protection (Sabates-Wheeler cited in UNICEF 2022). Anecdotal evidence does exist. For example, GESI actors have been found to rapidly identify ways to register households that may traditionally have been excluded; providing last mile outreach and registration of high-risk households (Cabot Venton, 2023). Similarly, UNICEF carried out a series of consultations as a basis for elevating the experiences of women girls.[5] However, there is a need to close this evidence gap, building on early work.

This study aims to expand our understanding of the roles of local actors – including women's organisations – in supporting social protection and strengthening gender equality. Our conceptual framing for this study centres on the need for shifting agency and decision-making dynamics to local actors – including GESI actors – across the social protection activities/building blocks to support more gender-responsive and inclusive outcomes. Our *Spectrum of Agency* (from **omitted, consulted, co-responsible, primarily responsible**) enables a more granular and operational understanding of current and potential roles and local actor agency across social protection programme framing, design, delivery, and learning (see *Annex A).*

1.2 Study Objectives

The objectives of this study are to:

- **Appraise how different local actors – including GESI actors - engage with social protection systems** across different contexts to improve effectiveness and inclusion;
- **Identify barriers to strengthening the role of different local actors** in supporting gender-responsive and inclusive social protection (GRISP); and
- **Propose recommendations for enhancing the role of local actors** in different contexts in supporting improved gender-responsive and inclusive social protection outcomes.

[3] The latter are called the social building blocks in this study (see *Annex A)*.

[4] For example, the *Grand Bargain*, the *International Statement on Supporting Locally Led Development*, and the 2022 *UK White Paper on International Development to Strengthen Leadership of Local Actors*.

[5] See the *We Deserve Project*, which is working towards more inclusive, gender-responsive, and transformative social protection.

1.3 Study Approach

This section provides a broad overview of the study approach, with more detail on the study conceptual framework and methodology provided in *Annexes A* and *B* respectively. The study employed a phased and conceptually grounded methodology to explore how local actors including GESI actors, engage with social protection systems across diverse contexts.

***The Inception Phase,* between April and August 2024, focused on refining the research scope, clarifying working definitions, and establishing a conceptual framework.** This included a high-level desk review of global literature and key informant interviews with international experts to assess the current roles, opportunities, and barriers for local actors in social protection. The conceptual framing highlighted four critical social protection system processes - **framing, design, delivery, and learning** - and introduced a "*Local Actor Agency Spectrum*" to assess the agency of diverse local actors drawing on the agency levels identified in *Table 1* (see *Annex A* for more details*).*

Table 1: Local Actor Agency Spectrum

Agency Level (& score)	**Level of Agency**	**Explanation**
A (10-12)	**Primarily responsible**	Local actors (including women's organisations & organisations representing diverse identities) lead, take decisions & act independently
B (7-9)	**Co-responsible**	Local actors are part of a formal system and take decisions jointly or independently
C (4-6)	**Consulted**	Local actors receive information on policies/ strategies/ programmes and engage in dialogue (often after consultation with their own constituents)
D (0-3)	**Omitted**	Local actors are unaware of opportunities for engagement and support

***Phase II,* between September 2024 and February 2025, involved deep dives in six countries: Afghanistan, Kenya, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nepal, and Sudan.** The countries were selected through a structured scoping process with selection criteria ensuring contextual diversity, presence of robust SP systems, and partnerships.[6]

The country deep dives were conducted by local researchers and comprised:

- **Country-level desk reviews** to understand the social protection ecosystem in each country (see *Annex C* for contextual overviews) and to identify focus programmes in each country (see *Annex D*);
- **120 key informant interviews** with a diverse mix of actors, including local non-governmental organisations (LNGOs), government representatives, community-based organisations (CBOs), and GESI actors;
- **118 surveys** with local and international actors (excluding Lebanon due to security issues), which measured the perceived agency of local actors using the established *Local Actor Agency Spectrum;* and.
- **A mapping of local actors** engaging in social protection programming in each of the deep dive country.

Individual country reports were prepared and the findings across all six deep dives were then synthesised into this current report and a separate report focusing on the *Role of Local Actors in Social Protection in Crisis Contexts*. Shorter more practical thematic policy briefings were also prepared to inform strategic interventions for strengthening the engagement of local actors in social protection.

[6] With the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), Social Protection Technical Assistance, Advice, and Resources Facility (STAAR), and The Share Trust.

2. THE ROLE OF LOCAL ACTORS

This section summarises the current *and* potential roles of diverse local actors in gender-responsive and inclusive social protection (GRISP) processes (framing, design, delivery, and **learning**) drawing upon the findings from the key informant interviews and surveys with local and national actors across the six deep dive countries.

More detailed analysis for GESI actors - including women's organisations (WOs),[7] organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), and Self Help Groups (SHGs) - by social protection process and activity/building block is shared in *Annex E*. The *Local Actor Agency Spectrum* was used throughout the research to score local and international actor ratings of the role of local actors across the social protection processes and building blocks:

10-12	Primarily responsible	7-9	Co-responsible	4-6	Consulted	0-3	Omitted

2.1 FRAMING

This section unpacks the current and potential roles of diverse local actors across key SP framing activities (building blocks) including: i) developing policy and programme objectives; ii) establishing programme governance and coordination; iii) mapping programme locations, risk, and vulnerabilities; and vi) deciding social protection (SP) priorities and needs.

Figure 1. FRAMING: International Actor Perceptions



Figure 2. FRAMING: Local Actor Perceptions



2.1.1 Current Roles

Government Actors

In relatively stable contexts, national government actors lead policy framing with limited input from other local actors. Ministries responsible for social welfare, women, youth, social affairs, and other key sectors (e.g., education, labour, health, disaster risk management) primarily formulate social protection legal frameworks, although in some countries there is reportedly limited coordination across government technical units (e.g., disability, gender), acting as a barrier to systematic inclusion of GESI. However, the national government in Lebanon has made important progress through its leadership in its gender-responsive and inclusive framing of social protection (the *National Social Protection Strategy*),

[7] These include women's rights organisations (WROs) and women-led organisations (WLOs).

including the launch of its disability allowance, which was used as a shock-responsive tool during the 2024 conflict.

In Lebanon, the national government has made notable strides in advancing its social protection landscape, particularly amid the crisis sparked by the October 2024 conflict. The Government responded swiftly by leveraging and expanding its existing social safety nets - most notably through the *National Poverty Targeting Programme* (NPTP) and *Emergency Social Safety Net* (ESSN) - to provide emergency cash assistance to over 263,000 conflict-affected individuals. Simultaneously, a key milestone was reached with the launch of a disability allowance under the *National Disability Allowance* (NDA) programme, offering a targeted monthly cash transfer to nearly 4,000 individuals with disabilities, including both Lebanese and refugee populations. This disability allowance served as a shock-responsive tool during the crisis and reflects the broader implementation of the country's *National Social Protection Strategy*, which is supported by international donors and agencies. Importantly, the government extended the NDA in September 2025, reinforcing the institutionalisation of long-term social assistance mechanisms amid Lebanon's ongoing socio-economic challenges.

Subnational government actors are largely only consulted with roles generally limited to discrete activities such as needs assessment, identifying priority locations, and community sensitisation. For example, in Kenya, key informants (KIs) reported that subnational governments are involved in sensitising community members (especially women, girls, and people with disabilities) on their rights and inclusion in SP programmes and advocating for their integration in SP policies. However, they were reported to have minimal agency and influence over the broader framing and strategic direction of programmes. This underscores a gap in local-level engagement in critical decision-making processes.

In conflict-affected contexts with *de facto* authorities (DfAs), where SP systems are nascent or disrupted, international actors often bypass government authorities due to sanctions or governance issues and instead lead the framing of SP programmes. In Afghanistan, for example, the *DfA's* role is primarily limited to registering internationally-led projects and implementing their own small-scale projects (funded with support from neighbouring or Islamic countries). They do not involve other local actors in planning or distributing of assistance.

Non-Government Actors

Local NGOs (LNGOs) have limited role and influence in developing programme objectives and priorities and are primarily only consulted. This is often in consultant-led workshops during the framing of internationally funded and led programmes, but this is context specific, and their role is very donor dependent. Key informants reported that often only "elite organisations" or research-focused organisations are involved (not those directly working with marginalised groups), resulting in programmes prioritising external agendas rather than local needs and GESI priorities. For example, in Sudan, LNGOs reported that they are sometimes excluded from SP framing of international actor-led programmes especially when they are considered only "implementing partners." Similarly, LNGOs implementing the *Cash Consortium of Sudan (CCS)* programme reported that they did not participate in the framing as their role was clearly defined as an implementing partner. However, this is not always the case and international actors leading the larger *Community, Recovery, and Livelihoods Programme* (CLRP) in Kenya, worked with LNGOs who in turn held community discussions to involve grassroots actors in the early framing stages of the project.

GESI actors in some contexts play a crucial role in advocating for the inclusion of women and other marginalised groups in SP policies and programmes, for example in Nepal where women groups protested against the exclusion of single women in SP programmes.

> *"Yes, they made a rule that the widows will get NPR 50,000 to remarry and there is no SSA for widows. In Nepal, widows usually do not re-marry, and this was an insult to us. We also believed that remarriage should be a choice and not enforced. The framing meant that if one does not*

choose to remarry, they are excluded from government support. This was an injustice. So, the single women groups throughout the country went for a protest and later the government pulled down the decision."

GESI actors, Key Informant, Sindhupalchok, Nepal

GESI actors, however, currently play a limited role in shaping SP programme objectives and governance - besides GESI-focused programmes - although they are at times consulted. Their participation is largely confined to GESI-focused programmes, disaster contexts (such as post Cyclone Mocha in Myanmar), or providing occasional input. For example, GESI actor inputs were solicited in INGO/LNGO consortium-wide discussions for the *Girl Improving Resilience Through Livelihoods and Health (Girl-H) Programme* and the *Unconditional cash transfer for Flood Response (UCT) Programme* in Kenya. Conversely, in Afghanistan, consultation took place for the *Resilience Building Afghanistan Project* and *Social Protection for Returnee Project*, but only with male members of NGOs and communities.

In Myanmar, following the Cyclone Mocha disaster, women's organisations, with support from international organisations, played a crucial role in identifying the specific needs of affected communities, particularly women and girls. They conducted rapid needs assessments and participatory consultations, which informed the development of programme objectives focused on shelter, food security, and psychosocial support tailored to the unique challenges faced by women in the post-disaster context.

In addition, Local GESI actors, especially women's organisations, are currently providing context specific information to help decide programme locations, but they are usually excluded in deciding programme priorities. For example, in Myanmar, GESI actors were reported to be mostly consulted in location mapping exercises and identifying hotspot locations, but their expertise in identifying the vulnerabilities of marginalised groups and therefore programme priorities, is currently underutilised.

CBOs/grassroots entities are generally omitted in social protection programme framing. For example, in Afghanistan, framing is typically led by international agencies, with limited integration of CBOs in identifying community priorities. By contrast, in Sudan, informal community-led initiatives including Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) play a pivotal role in determining social protection priorities and filling gaps in formal social protection systems. These grassroots groups are often among the first to respond, leveraging community trust and local knowledge to identify the most urgent needs, coordinate aid, and advocate for equitable resource distribution.

2.1.2 Potential Roles

Government Actors

National government actors self-reported high potential to lead SP framing outside of conflict contexts, whilst creating opportunities for subnational government to take co-responsibility for framing. The findings further highlighted the unrealised potential of subnational government actors in more stable contexts (given their more intimate understanding of their sub-regions) to integrate community-identified needs and priorities and co-create social protection programmes with national governments (e.g., in Nepal, Kenya). Similarly, key informants highlighted the importance of institutionalising the role of technical government units (e.g., for gender, disability, youth) to ensure GRISP. For example, in Lebanon, respondents stated that the *Ministry of Social Affairs* (MoSA) could lead future framing with stronger technical input from its own gender and disability units.

Subnational government actors in crisis contexts such as Sudan were also identified as having the potential to take co-responsibility for framing. Respondents in Afghanistan further highlighted that if there is a change in the government in the near future, then both national and subnational government should be leading on programme framing given that "*ownership of the government is essential in this sector.*"

Non-Government Actors

LNGOs were rated in the survey by all actors as having significant potential to play a co-responsible role – particularly in programme governance and priority setting – and in the absence of legitimate governments. Furthermore, respondents felt that LNGOs have the potential to lead in facilitation roles, including convening pre-framing consultation (to support community actors translate grassroots realities into technically sound proposals) and in identifying the specific needs of disaster affected communities.

The survey data further highlighted a strong potential for GESI actors to assume greater responsibility, particularly in mapping programme locations, identifying vulnerabilities, and shaping SP priorities. Key informants however clarified that this requires investment in capacity strengthening and more inclusive governance engagement mechanisms. Examples from Kenya and Nepal highlight both the missed opportunities in leveraging local expertise and the impact of feminist political activism in influencing social protection policies. Key informant respondents, particularly from women's organisations also reported that they could play a more central role in framing to ensure community-centred and GRISP.

In Kenya, women legislators worked together across parties, in alliance with the Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), and in collaboration with the emerging formal government gender entities, to secure substantive gains for women and girls in the 2010 Constitution. This feminist political activism contributed to revisions of laws on entitlements to women in Kenya's *Social Protection Policy*.

The capacities of GESI actors can also be harnessed to improve programme governance, coordination, and information sharing across marginalised actors. In crisis contexts like Myanmar and Sudan, women-led organisations have demonstrated leadership in needs assessment and coordination, despite systemic exclusion from decision-making. In many instances, self-funded organisations are deciding SP priorities and needs for their own SP programmes based on their analysis of the challenges women face on the ground. In addition, in Sudan, it was reported that there is significant number of women volunteers, whose expertise and knowledge could be leveraged to help shape SP programming.

In the context of ongoing conflict in Myanmar, women-led CSOs have demonstrated their ability to effectively coordinate humanitarian assistance and protection services for displaced populations. They have established local networks and coordination mechanisms that facilitate information sharing, resource mobilisation, and service delivery, often in challenging and insecure environments.

In Sudan, a key informant from a grassroots women's organisation indicated that there is a considerable number of women volunteers, with the knowledge and understanding for participating in developing SP programme objectives to ensure gender-responsive social protection. She added that some international organisations that thematically focus on gender are willing to collaborate with grassroots women organisations.

Finally, CBOs view themselves as potentially playing a co-responsible role in programme framing. This suggests growing recognition that community structures can play a primary responsibility during key aspects of framing for instance in developing programme objectives or deciding social protection priorities, if support is provided. In Lebanon, it was proposed that CBOs could collaborate and form coalitions that lead independent consultation, ensuring grassroots input reaches the *Ministry of Social Affairs* (MoSA) at the start of policy discussions.

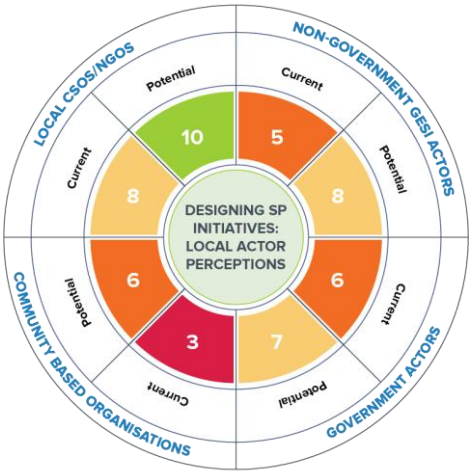
2.2 DESIGN

This section unpacks the current and potential roles of diverse local actors across key SP design activities (building blocks) including: i) developing targeting criteria; ii) deciding conditionality of assistance; iii) deciding beneficiary entitlements; and iv) deciding on transfer processes.

Figure 3. DESIGN: International Actor Perceptions



Figure 4. DESIGN: Local Actor Perceptions



2.2.1 Current Roles

Government Actors

For government-led projects, national government actors lead design, with limited or no involvement of sub-national government and non-governmental local actors (e.g., Nepal and Afghanistan). For example, the DfA in Afghanistan and specifically the *Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority* (ANDMA), designed their own small assistance projects for post climate-related disasters and even though the subnational government actors were involved in its implementation, they did not play any role in design. In Lebanon, during the design of the *National Disability Allowance (NDA) Programme*, the Ministry of MoSA led the design, chaired consultations, and led in deciding on the eligibility criteria with no involvement of subnational actors.

Whilst subnational government actors are not always involved in initial design of national programmes, subnational key informants in Nepal and Sudan highlight that they had tried to later influence project design and tailor to their authorities but generally without success. For example, subnational government respondents implementing the *Social Security Allowance (SSA) Programme* in Nepal reported that they had tried to add additional beneficiaries (including those without citizenship) without success and are often unaware of all nationally-designed programmes.

> *"We don't know about the prime minister employment programme (PMEP). We have heard that the government has a programme that gives work worth 88 days of salary to people, but we don't know the details. We are not in any committee about that. I don't think there is any committee on that."*
>
> **Local Political Leader, Key Informant, Sindhupalchok, Nepal**

Non-Government Actors

For internationally led SP programmes, particularly in conflict contexts, design is generally carried out by international actors. International actors reported that local government actors, larger LNGOs, and sometimes GESI actors are consulted on specific activities, for example developing beneficiary targeting criteria in Kenya, and awareness raising, beneficiary identification, registration, and verification in Nepal. However, in conflict contexts, such as Sudan, international actors were identified as only involving local actors in the delivery of pre-designed programmes. For LNGO led programmes, for example in Sudan, LNGOs identified that they use participatory needs assessments to inform design.

In Lebanon, respondents reported that for the *Emergency Social Safety Net* (ESSN) programme, international actors, particularly the World Bank, led the design almost entirely as part of the *Lebanon Crisis Response Plan* and emergency funding streams. This set the targeting mechanism, the eligibility framework, and the delivery architecture. The World Bank was responsible for developing the proxy means test (PMT) formula, designing delivery channels, and defining household-level eligibility, with MoSA being involved to a limited extent.

A local women-led organisation in Kenya implementing various social protection programmes for women and girls reported that they provide beneficiary entitlements as prescribed by their donors - mostly international actors - and do not have any say in changing or altering the prescribed value of entitlements.

For national government-led programmes, in more stable contexts such as Kenya and Nepal, there is a mixed perception on the level of LNGO agency during programme design. National government actors from the ministries[8] report including other actors beyond the subnational governments in design decision making, including GESI actors. However, respondents from the *Prime Minister Employment Programme (PMEP)* in Nepal highlighted that local non-government actors were not involved in the design and LNGOs shared they played no role in the design of the *Disability Allowance Programme* as this was primarily designed by the national government, resulting in support that is not accessible to many people living with disability.

CBO key informants reported that they are generally excluded in the design of government led national SP programmes. This was confirmed by LNGO respondents from Myanmar and Afghanistan who noted that CBOs lack formal inclusion in design processes, which resulted in missed opportunities to leverage their knowledge, experience, and capacities to advocate on behalf of communities and centre programming on their priorities. In Myanmar, CBOs are sometimes consulted by INGOs to adapt programme design and in Lebanon whilst lacking formal inclusion, they sometimes play informal advisory roles.

Local GESI actors are generally only consulted rather than taking a lead role on gender or disability-focused programmes, leaving significant untapped potential to ensure all SP programmes are gender-responsive and inclusive. For example, in Nepal, women's organisations were consulted in the design of the single women allowance. In less targeted SP programmes, GESI actors are often consulted in the development of targeting criteria but rarely lead, despite evidence demonstrating their expertise in identifying gendered and age-specific vulnerabilities. Deciding beneficiary entitlements remains an area where GESI actors are either omitted or have minimal input, primarily due to donor-driven harmonisation efforts, though international actors recognise GESI actor capacity to take a more central role. However, national governments in Kenya and Nepal highlighted their efforts to ensure that local women, children, and people with disabilities including their representative groups, are part of

[8] *Labour and Social Protection* (Department for Social Protection and Senior Citizen Affairs) in Kenya; and the *Ministry of Labour, Employment, and Social Security* (MoLESS) and the *Ministry of Children, Women, and Social Welfare* (MoWCSW) in Nepal.

the decision-making process during the design of general social protection programmes. They facilitate this, by rolling-out awareness raising to minimise cultural barriers that may prevent women and marginalised groups from benefiting from inclusion in decision making around social protection initiatives.

Local GESI actors highlighted occasions when they had changed programme design features as a result of national-level advocacy. For example, in Nepal, GESI actor respondents reported that even though the SSA programme was designed by the national government, their representatives at the national level were consulted during the design of the programme, which resulted in policy-related modifications to the design of single women allowances, notably changing the targeting criteria. Previously, the allowance was intended for women who were expected to marry; but following GESI actor input, it was changed to include all single women and widows. For decisions on transfer processes, local GESI actors were reported to play a greater role, often co-responsible for designing distribution mechanisms that address local barriers. Countries however, varied in the extent of their inclusion, with survey data showing that Afghanistan, Lebanon and Sudan had more limited GESI actor engagement, compared with Kenya, Myanmar, and Nepal most likely reflective of the political context and restrictive social norms.

2.2.2 Potential Roles

Government Actors

Respondents highlighted that subnational government actors have the potential to co-design SP programmes with national governments in order to address regional disparities and GRISP (e.g., Nepal and Kenya). For example, subnational government actors in Nepal identified that whilst they could work within the national framework established by federal government, programmes would be more effective if they were allowed to decide on the design of transfers, beneficiary selection, and targeting, for example for the *Social Security Allowance* (SSA) programme. Providing subnational government actors with the authority and agency to adapt the design of SP based on local needs and priorities, would ensure better targeting, inclusion, and outreach, provide support across the nexus, help increase programme sustainability[9] and strengthen beneficiary resilience. Specifically, subnational government respondents in Nepal noted that if they had been involved in design of the SSA programme, they would have worked with the community to design a programme that promotes a more sustainable approach by supporting both resilience to disasters *and* generating employment/income to lift beneficiaries out of poverty.

In Nepal, respondents highlighted that current project design for the *Prime Minister Employment Programme (PMEP)* programme does not take into account skills mismatch or the potential for peer-to-peer capacity sharing. For example, the targeted beneficiaries are extremely poor and without capacity sharing, they do not have the skills for technical work such as laying slabs in roads or putting tiles in stairs.

"You must have heard that one person almost died here when the slab overturned. This was because the current design does not envision the role of skills in local development. It also does not envision a peer-to-peer skilling process. If local actors were involved, this would not have happened."

Local government actors further shared that if they had roles in design, they would have been able to select what is the most useful training for the local population:

"Last year, they had training for masons in the menu. The targeting criteria was the poorest of the poor. In my village, there is a community which is among the poorest in this area. So, we had to select them. But all families in that village come from generations of masons. They don't need that training - they have been doing it for years. So we called for applications but no one from the

[9] In the context of designing social protection programmes, sustainability refers to the ability of these programmes to provide long-term, stable, and adaptable support to vulnerable populations without compromising future resources or effectiveness (World Bank, 2023).

village was interested. It is understandable - they all have been doing the work for generations. Such things are a waste of resources."
Subnational government, Key Informant, Sindhupalchok, Nepal

Non-Government Actors

Both international and local actors highlighted that LNGOs exhibit the highest potential to transition into leadership roles in programme design. For example, in Kenya, they were identified as potentially taking a co-lead role (along with non-governmental GESI actors) in proposal development for consortium-based internationally funded projects. Further, in Sudan, it was identified that capacity strengthening activities (e.g., community assessments, developing targeting criteria, and designing transfer conditions) would enable LNGOs to enhance the design of their own social protection programmes.

The survey findings showed that GESI actors—especially women's organisations—are viewed by all actors to have *strong potential* to co-design projects. This includes co-designing conditionality of assistance (e.g., in Myanmar and Kenya) and taking primarily responsibility for deciding beneficiary entitlement. This signifies trust in local GESI actors and the importance of these actors in more effective GRISP. LNGO respondents further highlighted the untapped potential of grassroots GESI actors in making decisions on transfer processes such as frequency and approach in crisis contexts (e.g., in Myanmar and Afghanistan). Their community-level implementation experience was reported to ideally position them to lead in defining locally appropriate gender responsive approaches, including the frequency and duration of transfers. For example, in remote areas of Myanmar with limited access to banking infrastructure, grassroots women's organisations could play a vital role in determining the most effective transfer methods, whether through mobile money, cash transfers via trusted community leaders, or in-kind distributions.

GESI actors' respondents involved in a disability and single women allowance in Nepal reported that they would potentially change targeting design of the programme, if allowed, to suit the economic needs of the households. They stated that they would adjust entitlements based on the economic conditions of the beneficiaries given their in-depth knowledge of the local context and the needs and priorities of marginalised groups.

Finally, respondents identified that CBOs should be more meaningfully involved and at least consulted in programme design, alongside support to realise this potential. For example, in Afghanistan, it was highlighted that CBOs "*know better how the local structures work, and how to better work and communicate with them.*" Similarly, CBOs in Nepal identified that at a minimum consultation and ideally co-responsibility would ensure programme design addresses context-specific exclusion issues and creates room for innovation. In Lebanon, respondents indicated that CBOs could serve as conveners, ensuring that local evidence, particularly from marginalised groups, is systematically integrated into design processes notably in programmes targeting PWD, refugees, and vulnerable households such as the NDA and ESSN. Similarly, in Lebanon, it was suggested that CBOs could co-design delivery of disability benefits to prevent gatekeeping by family members. More generally, it was highlighted that CBOs could take on a more prominent role in co-designing rather than solely providing feedback during workshops. This would include more active involvement in designing key elements of the programme (e.g., eligibility criteria and delivery mechanisms) to ensure that programmes are both inclusive and practical.

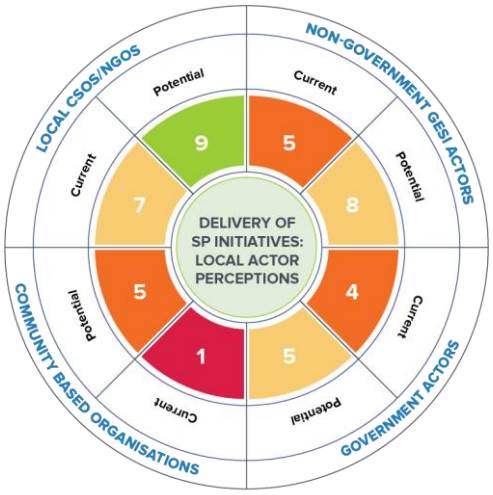
2.3 DELIVERY

This section unpacks the current and potential roles of diverse local actors across key SP delivery activities (building blocks) including: i) awareness raising and advocacy; ii) beneficiary registration and verification; and iii) delivering social protection benefits.

Figure 5. DELIVERY: International Actor Perceptions



Figure 6. DELIVERY: Local Actor Perceptions



2.3.1 Current Roles

Government Actors

National governments hold prime responsibility for programme delivery for government-led programmes but rely on subnational government actors and local NGOs for execution (e.g., Kenya, Nepal)**.** For example, subnational government actors administer social protection programmes (both internationally and nationally funded), notably community mobilisation (beneficiary verification and supervision) and in particular cash transfers in Kenya, Nepal, and Sudan. The DfA in Afghanistan delivers small aid programmes (supported by neighbouring or Islamic countries, given sanctions imposed by other countries), through their local offices and with the assistance of local leaders but are not involved in larger internationally funded social protection programmes. In Lebanon, MoSA manages the delivery and beneficiary verification for the NDA programme and UNICEF supports delivery with technical input and outreach. Similarly, under the ESSN programme, MoSA oversees delivery but relies heavily on WFP and other international actors for field operations.

Non-Government Actors

In Afghanistan and Nepal, private sector actors[10] were identified as playing an important role in the delivery of social protection benefits. For example, local banks in Nepal are tasked with the actual distribution of allowances. Similarly in Nepal, subnational government and in Afghanistan, some local NGOs highlighted that they contract money service providers (MSPs) or mobile money service providers (MMSPs) to assist with the distribution of funds to beneficiaries.

[10] Private sector actors, while not consistently engaged in all study contexts but, were identified by key respondents across the countries as important players in social protection delivery. These include local banks and mobile money service providers.

> *"We asked the manager for support. There are elderly who are fully paralysed and other very old people who cannot go to the bank. So, we used our personal relationships to persuade the bank to come to the ward for distribution. In some cases, the managers were kind enough and we took them to the community itself for distribution of allowances. They met the people and gave the money personally;"*
>
> **Subnational government actor, Key Informant, Sindhupalchok, Nepal**

LNGOs lead awareness raising and sensitisation, beneficiary selection, verification, and registration for internationally led programmes and the distribution of assistance. For example in Kenya, key informants from LNGOs implementing the unconditional cash transfer programme reported that they take the lead in beneficiary selection, verification and registration, with technical support from international actors. The key informants reported that each LNGO is responsible for maintaining beneficiary lists and conducting verification in the locations allocated for the programme. However, it was identified by LNGO respondents in Sudan that LNGO actors can be excluded from some delivery aspects such as fund management and cash distribution and their involvement primarily focuses on responding to immediate needs on the ground.

A local CSO in the *Ayeyarwady region* of Myanmar conducted awareness-raising sessions on women's protection, reaching 1100 men and women in 2018 from a one-year sub-grant funding they received from an INGO. They also facilitated workshops with INGOs, local CSOs, administrators, and the *Department of Social Welfare*, demonstrating collaboration and knowledge sharing among diverse stakeholders.

Local GESI actors play a crucial role in delivering GESI targeted social protection programmes through awareness-raising, beneficiary registration and verification, and benefit distribution especially in stable contexts (e.g., Kenya & Nepal) and in consortium-led programmes. GESI actors, including women's organisations and OPDs, lead efforts to educate communities on available programmes, advocate for gender and social inclusion, and ensure vulnerable groups access their rights. They collaborate with international actors but are often seen as primary implementers, leveraging community networks for outreach. For beneficiary registration, local GESI actors work closely with governments and INGOs to prevent duplication and enhance targeting, as seen in Kenya and Nepal. Their role in delivering social protection benefits is particularly significant due to their proximity to communities, with examples from Sudan and Myanmar showing their engagement in providing medical aid and financial support. While international actors recognise their contributions, perspectives on responsibility vary by context, with these actors increasingly seen as key partners rather than just having a supporting role.

In Sudan, respondents from women's organisations indicated that they have the full mandate of setting up processes for distribution of assistance in collaboration with women's Mutual Aid Groups. They added that sometimes they receive calls from women groups to intervene in response to some issues such as food and cash needs, but this support is usually informal and outside of formal SP systems.

CBOs reported that they also support last-mile delivery - outreach, registration, and advocacy - but usually lack formal implementation roles (e.g., Sudan, Nepal). In several deep dive countries, some LNOs work directly with CBOs to coordinate SP delivery in the villages in order to identify and address GESI priorities. For example, in Afghanistan, LNGO respondents reported that they often work with CBOs when registering beneficiaries in order to ensure that there is equal access to social protection benefits. Similarly in Nepal, CBO respondents reported that they support the subnational government actors in ensuring SSA programme beneficiaries receive assistance through raising awareness, registration, verification of beneficiary lists and informal monitoring.

> *"When we are in the women's group meeting, women and men come with their citizenships and tell us to look if they are old enough to receive SSA. We also supported single women to register for SSA as soon as they are eligible. If someone does not have citizenship, we helped them to make it. We still do it as they come to us. If they have any problems, they come to us first because we are in the village. But we don't have any formal role now."* **CBO Key Informant, Rautahat, Nepal**

> *"We are based in the village, and the local government used to call on us to support people in accessing SSA. We conducted weekly classes for various marginalised groups to raise awareness about what is SSA and how to obtain it. We also assisted the local government in monitoring issues such as ghost beneficiaries and duplications. For instance, some individuals would not report a death and continue claiming SSA. We supported the distribution process. On distribution days, we monitored attendance to ensure beneficiaries received their allowance. For those who were absent, we personally delivered the allowance to their homes"*
> **CBO, Key Informant, Nepal**

CBOs especially in crisis contexts, lead the delivery of informal social protection as an integral part of the daily lives, complementing formal social protection programmes. CBO respondents from Sudan indicated that they work with volunteers in remote rural areas in eastern Sudan and provide them with material support to help women internally displaced persons (IDPs) within their areas. In addition, these women volunteers travel to those areas to organise awareness raising campaigns for women on different topics. In Sudan, the Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) organise food, shelter, and cash services to communities affected by conflict in Sudan.

Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) in Sudan were reported to play a critical role in delivering social protection benefits to communities, especially amid ongoing crises and instability. Acting as localised hubs, ERRs coordinate humanitarian efforts and facilitate the rapid identification and support of vulnerable households, ensuring that essential resources such as food, cash transfers, and medical aid reach those most in need. By working closely with community leaders, local organisations, and international partners, ERRs help bridge gaps in service delivery, enhance the effectiveness of social protection interventions, and build trust with affected populations. Their presence was reported to enable a more agile, context-responsive approach, allowing for timely interventions that address urgent needs while laying the groundwork for longer-term resilience and recovery.

Importantly, Mutual Aid or Self Help Groups were reported as an increasingly important vehicle for delivering social protection in conflict or restrictive contexts, including Myanmar, Afghanistan, and Sudan.

In Sudan, Mutual Aid Groups, including women only groups, supporting some of the most marginalised community groups are increasing. This aligns with the literature, which confirms that the current conflict witnessed the emergence of many mutual aid groups that mobilise resources from within and outside the community to deliver relief services to conflict-affected communities across Sudan (Abbas & Abdalhadi, 2023). The humanitarian model these groups are promoting is deeply rooted in the Sudanese culture and is governed by strong and longstanding social norms (Birch, *et al.,* 2024).

2.3.2 Potential Roles

Government Actors

Key informants identified that national governments should formalise partnerships with local actors to improve delivery efficiency. Further, subnational government actors should lead in coordinating community mobilisation, awareness raising, capacity strengthening, grassroots service delivery as they are closer to the communities in need and can ensure transparency in delivery of assistance.

> *"Instead of central government saying we give allowance to this and this person, it would have been more effective if we could look at the types of beneficiaries in our local context and decide who needs SSAs. Based on our geographical contexts and availability of transportation, we could design the delivery. For example, we could say, we are going to do door-to-door delivery for elderly and people with disabilities who cannot go to the bank, and we follow a hybrid model of both bank-based and personal delivery of SSA.*
>
> **Subnational government actor, Key Informant, Sindhupalchok, Nepal**

In conflict contexts, respondents identified that the political situation needs to change before large-scale formal social protection programmes can be delivered by the national government. For example, prior to 2021, the Afghanistan government had the capacity to deliver assistance to high-risk groups, including through social protection programmes for pensions, monthly funds for people with disabilities, and monthly funds to families of soldiers. If the political situation changes, respondents noted that funds and support can once more be delivered by, and with, the involvement of government, and could potentially be expanded to include providing assistance more broadly. It would also allow for cash transfers to resume through private sector partners, such as banks and money service providers, including through mobile money transfers.

Non-Government Actors

LNGOs were identified as having the potential to expand delivery in hard-to-reach areas (e.g., in Kenya) and in crisis contexts. Their capacity to work with CBOs was identified as enabling them to deliver to heard-to-reach areas (e.g., in Sudan). In addition, respondents in Kenya, identified that LNGOs have the potential to lead the digitisation of assistance delivery. Similarly, where they are less involved (e.g., Myanmar), respondents identified that LNGOs could play a more significant role in awareness raising and advocacy, beneficiary registration and verification, and service delivery (e.g., assistance distribution). It was therefore highlighted that LNGOs could expand delivery roles – including increasing reach, inclusion, and coverage, especially in delivering digitised assistance and coordinating with CBOs.

Local GESI actors were identified by international actors through the survey as potentially taking primary responsibility in awareness raising and advocacy for social protection programmes. This aligns with the literature findings, which highlight that social movements promoting women's and children's rights can play a leading role in supporting gender equality by providing resources to women and girls in their communities, raising awareness on women's rights at all levels, and monitoring and advocating for greater accountability of laws, policies, programmes, and delivery services (UN Women, 2020).

2.4 MONITORING AND EVALUATION (Learning)

This section unpacks the current and potential roles of diverse local actors across key SP learning activities (building blocks) including: i) designing monitoring and evaluation (M&E) tools and indicators; ii) M&E data collection and analysis; iii) evaluating, learning, and reporting; and iv) collecting beneficiary feedback and response.

Figure 7. LEARNING: International Actor Perceptions



Figure 8. LEARNING: Local Actor Perceptions



2.4.1 Current Roles

Government Actors

For government-led social protection programmes, national government actors are generally leading M&E but there is not always a rigorous M&E component, incorporating community engagement. National government actors primarily focus on ensuring compliance with programme policies and guidelines, and at times M&E is reported to be "very basic." For example, the DfA in Afghanistan, through the sectoral ministries and ministry of economy, are responsible for ensuring projects are implemented accurately and transparently. Similarly, in Lebanon, LNGO respondents reported that MoSA is focusing on beneficiary verification, updating expiry records, communicating updated data to international actors, and ensuring the programme's reach and accuracy. Yet, these respondents identified that MoSA has limited capacity for M&E, lacking the necessary systems for tracking social protection outcomes. Respondents further noted that the Lebanon's government's involvement is often motivated by short-term political interests rather than long-term programme evaluation.

Subnational government actors are conducting some monitoring but lack resources, tools, or indicators for systematic evaluation (e.g., Nepal, Kenya). For example, in Nepal, despite the lack of tools and resources, subnational government actors ensure that all social protection stakeholders implementing programmes in their localities follow the guidelines given by the national government on delivery and management. Subnational government actors in Nepal further reported that they conduct monitoring through periodic visits to the community, daily interactions with people, and more informally by participating in cultural, social, and religious activities in the community, where beneficiaries can reach out.

> *"There are no formal indicators or monitoring system, but we are always monitoring for any exclusion, challenges to the beneficiaries and fraudulences. We live here and know when beneficiaries die. We visit their house, and we have custom of giving "mana chamal[2]". It is a social custom. When we visit the relatives of the deceased, we tell them to register the death. If they don't do it long after they have completed the rituals, we call them and ask to register. If they don't do it even then, we ourselves take the name off the beneficiary list."*
>
> **Subnational government, Key Informant, Sindhupalchok, Nepal**

Non-Government Actors

International actors (donors and INGOs), especially in crisis contexts, often control data collection and M&E processes. In some complex contexts such as Afghanistan they have hired local third party monitors (e.g., consultants)**,** which is costly but perceived as one of the only reliable options for carrying out M&E. In Myanmar, LNGOs are seen as having *ad hoc* involvement in programme monitoring and generally implement pre-defined frameworks when involved. Similarly, in Lebanon, LNGO respondents demonstrated that M&E is donor-driven, with UNICEF, International Labour Organisation (ILO), and other agencies designing indicators, templates, and reporting processes. These are shared with MoSA, but final frameworks follow donor requirements, especially for programmes funded by the World Bank and European Union.

In more stable contexts such as Kenya and Nepal, LNGOs are often involved in data collection or informally reporting issues from the field but are rarely included in designing frameworks and indicators for evaluation processes. However, diverse local actors – including GESI actors and local government actors - are working together to establish committees and forums that can support programmes, including more inclusive monitoring processes (e.g., in Kenya). In Nepal, key informants from LNGOs stressed that due to their organisational mandate and their personal ethical commitments, they are informally reporting any challenges with social protection systems, issues of exclusion and fraudulence to the sub-national government actors on behalf of the beneficiaries.

> "*We were part of the local government institutional monitoring system as the members of the ward citizen forum and the civic awareness centre were committee members of the SSA. Both the ward citizen forum and the civic awareness centre were created for the purpose. In the civic awareness centre we used to run classes but SSA regularly with the marginalised groups. But after federalisation, we don't exist"*
>
> **CSO, Women Key Informant, Sindhupalchok, Nepal**

> *"14 single women had not received the social protection allowance in our village. I went to the bank manager to find out why they had not received the allowance. The manager did not know. So, I went to the mayor. He inquired around and informed that it was because they had not renewed their registration. As it was the new rule from the government, he could not do anything about it if they did not register. So, I told them about it, and they got the allowance."*
>
> **Grassroots, Women, Key Informant, Bardiya, Nepal**
>
> "*They were supposed to receive their allowance in July, but they had not received until 5 months. So people came to me saying the bank was not giving them allowance. When I went to inquire, I found that the ward office had been padlocked by some groups suspecting corruption with a local development work. So, I told them that the allowance has been delayed because the ward is under investigation and that they will get it soon*."
>
> **GESI Actor Women, Key Informant, Rautahat, Nepal**

Local GESI actors play a crucial role in M&E of social protection programmes, particularly in data collection, analysis, and beneficiary feedback but are rarely involved in designing processes and tools. However, their involvement in designing M&E tools and indicators was reported to vary by context. In crisis-affected settings like Myanmar and Afghanistan, international actors primarily design M&E tools, limiting local actors to a consultative role, whereas in stable contexts like Kenya, local GESI actors take on more responsibility. International actors reported viewing local GESI actors as having a consultative role in M&E reporting, while retaining primary control themselves. In contrast, local actors perceive themselves as co-responsible, highlighting a discrepancy in perceived roles and a potential underestimation of local capacity.

In some contexts, where CBOs are implementing their own self-funded SP programmes (e.g., in Sudan), they carry out their own monitoring including designing tools, indicators and data collection. However, respondents noted that these CBOs struggle with reporting findings as they lack

capacities. Further, respondents in Sudan reported that CBOs often collect feedback and complaints from beneficiaries of internationally-led SP programmes (both observations and notes) and then share with relevant INGO/LNGO and escalate complaints to the DfA/government as needed. It was also reported that community members approach these CBOs for support, and as a result CBOs informally connect beneficiaries to grievance handling mechanisms established by INGOs.

2.4.2 Potential Roles

Government Actors

It was highlighted that national Government should institutionalise community-led M&E for greater accountability. For example, in Lebanon, international actor respondents indicated that MoSA could work with OPDs, other CBOs and GESI actors in the *National Disability Allowance* programme to create regular feedback loops and improve the tracking of how funds are used, with OPDs helping design better verification systems to ensure allowances reach people with disabilities directly.

Subnational government actors were identified by respondents as having the potential to lead localised impact assessments, ensuring timely adaptations. The findings also identified the potential for more participatory M&E approaches that actively engage local actors, including subnational government, in all stages of the process for more contextually relevant, credible, and impactful evaluations.

Non-Government Actors

LNGOs were identified by both LNGO and international actor respondents as having the potential to co-lead performance evaluations and facilitate third-party assessments. Local actors also reported a willingness to take on greater responsibility in M&E and therefore international actors/other local actors should consider how best to support this by providing the necessary resources and capacity strengthening.

GESI actors were widely recognised for their ability to collect and analyse data, although international actors scored them as co-responsible rather than primarily responsible. A significant gap exists in M&E reporting, where local GESI actors perceive themselves as having the potential for co-responsibility of MEAL while international actors are viewed as maintaining control. Similarly, in beneficiary feedback collection, local GESI actors see themselves as central, while international actors assign them a shared role. For example, GESI actors including women's organisations were reported to be uniquely positioned to design inclusion indicators and collect nuanced feedback, leveraging their networks to co-develop indicators and run feedback loops. These findings suggest an opportunity to enhance local GESI actor engagement in M&E, leveraging their proximity to communities to improve accountability and responsiveness in social protection programmes.

> *"They can use us to make monitoring system and indicators. We know local government does not have the resources to reach everywhere. If we are given roles in developing monitoring system and indictors, we can use our networks to bring in different perspectives and have an inclusive framework and indicator. Our networks are spread all over the municipality and they have regular monthly meetings. So, we can have a large number of consultations without spending any money. For us it is easier to develop the indicators. We can help the local government in this and in monitoring"*
>
> **CBO, Key Informant, Saptari, Nepal**

Finally, CBOs are well positioned to lead in feedback systems and community accountability mechanisms. The proximity of CBOs makes them ideal for real-time beneficiary feedback collection if capacity strengthening is provided. However, survey findings show that international actors perceive themselves as retaining primary responsibility, viewing CBOs as having the potential for co-responsibility.

3. BARRIERS, OPPORTUNITIES AND PRIORITIES

This section unpacks the barriers to strengthening the engagement of local actors in implementing gender-responsive and socially inclusive social protection. It also briefly summarises the opportunities identified by local actors to overcome these barriers and enhance their role in securing more inclusive and transformative social protection. It concludes with a summary of priorities for support identified by local actors. A summary of the key barriers identified by key informants for each of the deep dive countries is shared in *Annex F.*

3.1 Political and Governance

Government restrictions and interference limit the ability of local actors to operate freely. In Myanmar, Sudan, and Afghanistan, authorities impose bureaucratic barriers such as registration requirements, approvals for activities, and surveillance of NGO operations. For example, the *Myanmar Organisation Registration Law*, enacted in 2022, replacing the previous, more lenient law, is reported to have significantly impacted local organisations operating within the country. All civil society organisations are required to register with the military government authorities and once registered they must seek prior approval for activities, funding, and partnerships. As the law imposes stringent conditions on partnerships, funding, and project implementation, NGOs supporting marginalised groups, including ethnic minorities and displaced populations reported difficulties operating due to bureaucratic hurdles and fear of retaliation. Similarly, in Sudan many grassroot organisations, including women initiatives, are not able to register with the government. Working within the current crisis context is very difficult for these groups because the government does not recognise their activities as legal and treats them with suspicion. This results in delays in implementation and limits the capacity of grassroot organisations to deliver effectively. It also exposes the volunteers to the risk of arrests and intimidation by security forces.

in Sudan, a key informant from a women's organisation reported that the government does not have a clear registration policy for civil society organisations, particularly in the aftermath of the ongoing conflict. She explained that the *Sudan Humanitarian Aid Commission* (HAC) introduced bureaucratic impediments when her organisation tried to register in Omdurman city to continue supporting communities in Khartoum. As a result, the organisation is exploring opportunities to register in other states, even though Omdurman is their priority area.

Political and cultural resistance to gender and disability inclusion in social protection policies. In Kenya and Sudan, many local government actors are reported to be resistant to the integration of GESI into social protection policies, primarily viewing social protection through a purely economic lens rather than as a tool for gender and disability inclusion. In Afghanistan, the DfA's policies have systematically excluded women from decision-making spaces, and women's organisations in Afghanistan have had to stop operating affecting the ability of WOs to influence or implement GESI-inclusive social protection programmes. In Lebanon, WOs and OPDs were only invited to provide feedback after major policy decisions had already been made, leaving limited room for meaningful input.

> *"Women are not allowed to work anywhere, especially with NGOs, and NGOs have lost their female staff. Implementation has been affected and slowed down. Working in a traditional society, female staff are needed to work with female members of the local community, but this is not possible under the new rules."*
>
> **Local NGO, Key Informant, Afghanistan**

Competing priorities in conflict contexts. Donors are reported to require stringent evidence-based reporting even in crisis contexts, which can be difficult for local organisations to fulfil in challenging or

insecure environments. Gathering evidence, explaining requirements to beneficiaries, and navigating logistical hurdles can be time-consuming and risky, especially when access is limited. Further, the pressure to meet donor requirements can divert resources from programme implementation and strain relationships with communities. In Lebanon, social protection is reported to be "*often manipulated for political gain*." Additionally, donor-driven priorities often dictate programming based on external interests rather than national needs, leading to interventions that may not align with local realities.



➢ ***In response to these barriers, key informants identified several opportunities including: i) identifying government champions*** *(including at the national level) to advocate for changes to ensure inclusive national social protection systems;* ***ii) institutionalising formal consultations with GESI actors*** *in policy development including leading gender audits on social protection frameworks;* ***iii) integrating international GESI standards*** *and requirements into national social protection systems; and* ***iv) supporting and integrating informal social protection mechanisms*** *including collectives (e.g., mutual aid groups) and individuals (e.g., volunteers in Sudan) into programme framing to deliver social assistance in political restrictive context*

3.2 Institutional and Capacity

Local GESI actors are limited to implementation. The study found that most local GESI actors are usually limited to implementation roles such as delivering social protection benefits and generally excluded from social protection programme design and framing. For example women's organisations, have increasingly been used as implementing arms of social protection programmes, despite key informants confirming their potential to help frame and design social protection programmes, which may limit their ability to push for transformation and can leave them promoting other institutional aims that may not reflect their own interests.

Gaps in GESI capacity strengthening for government actors. National and subnational government actors in Kenya, Nepal, Sudan, and Afghanistan consistently highlighted the need for capacity strengthening on gender transformative and socially inclusive social protection programming to enable them to better support the communities they serve.

Limited technical expertise among GESI actors in social protection design and delivery. In Kenya and Nepal, women-led and disability-focused organisations reported lacking specialised training in social protection policy, making it difficult for them to engage effectively in technical discussions. In Sudan and Myanmar, many grassroots GESI actors operate informally and lack structured organisational capacity, limiting their ability to receive funding or participate in formal coordination or consultation platforms.

Limited or non-existent disaggregated gender and disability data including for priorities and needs. In Afghanistan and Lebanon, the absence of sex, age, and disability disaggregated data leads to GESI-blind policy design and programmes that are not responsive to the needs of women, youth, and persons with disabilities. For example, in Sudan, humanitarian organisations collect data on food insecurity but do not systematically track gender-based vulnerabilities or access barriers for persons with disabilities.



➢ ***In response to these barriers, key informants identified several opportunities including****: i)* ***integrating GESI-specific*** *indicators into national social protection data systems and monitoring processes;* ***ii) supporting ongoing peer-to-peer capacity sharing on GESI*** *led by local women's organisations; and* ***iii) providing capacity for strengthening subnational government actors*** *on GESI-responsive social protection (particularly where social sector budgets are being transferred to local governments such as in Nepal).*

3.3 Partnership and Coordination

Short-term engagement and partnerships with local GESI actors. GESI actors highlighted their piecemeal involvement in social protection programmes which limits their ability to provide sustained, long-term impact including supporting long-term GESI outcomes. For example, in Kenya, LNGOs implementing the *Girl-H Programme* stated that at times they are forced to undertake other programme activities outside of GESI-related activities in order to secure funding due to the short-term nature of GESI-focused projects.

INGO-dominated ecosystem. INGOs, for example in Kenya and Myanmar, were reported to often dominate funding decision making and programme design, relegating local actors to subcontracted service providers rather than equal partners. Similarly, in Sudan and Nepal, international actors were found to lead gender and disability-inclusive social protection programmes and not formally integrate local GESI actors into governance structures. In Afghanistan, INGOs act as intermediaries for GESI-focused funding but provide little long-term investment in local capacity.

Fragmentation among local GESI actors. Gaps in coordination across GESI actors reduces collective bargaining power in social protection advocacy. In Lebanon and Myanmar, WOs and OPDs operate in silos and lack unified representation, limiting their ability to negotiate with policymakers. In Kenya, competition for limited funding has created tensions among women's organisations, further weakening collective advocacy efforts. This fragmented approach prevents them from building a deep understanding on key SP issues, and limits their ability to design and implement effective, long-term GESI interventions.

➢ ***In response to these barriers, key informants identified several opportunities including**: **i) supporting coordination mechanisms and partnerships** between GESI actors; **ii) including GESI actors in social protection policy forums, networks, and coordination platforms**, to enhance visibility and influence (for example disability organisations into broader humanitarian coordination groups in Myanmar); and iii) **supporting a shift in INGO dominance to locally led GESI social protection** by supporting GESI actor leadership and roles in the design of social protection strategies (e.g., targeting mechanisms & benefit allocations) and ensuring gender-responsive service delivery.*

3.4 Financial

Reliance on indirect funding and lack of autonomy. Non state actors highlighted gaps in direct funding for social protection programming, with funding usually channelled via international intermediaries (i.e., UN, INGOs), creating a cascade of challenges for local organisations:

» **Low levels of funding** result in prolonged dependency and constrains the ability of GESI actors to reach all those most at risk but too often systematically excluded from current social protection programmes. For example, in Nepal, key informants from GESI and grassroot organisations indicated that there remain many high-risk women, who are marginalised in deep, remote and hard-to reach parts of the country, who are not currently reached through the main social protection programmes. Local NGOs – including GESI actors – repeatedly emphasised funding constraints and identified operating with limited budgets.

» **Poor quality funding,** which is not flexible, does not transfer costs for overheads, and is not long term rarely allows for sustained investment in specific areas. Respondents confirmed that even if a local organisation demonstrate success in a particular sector, the lack of long-term/multi-year funding prevents them from deepening their expertise and developing specialised skills and makes it difficult for LNGOs to retain qualified staff, offer competitive salaries (compared with INGOs/UN) and invest in organisational growth. Their inability to offer competitive salaries and professional development opportunities creates a significant barrier to attracting and retaining qualified staff. This high turnover

rate impacts institutional knowledge and organisational capacity, hindering the development of essential structures, policies, and procedures.

» **Short-term, project-based funding** prevents sustainable GESI inclusion in social protection. In Kenya and Myanmar, funding cycles last only 6–12 months, making it difficult for WOs and OPDs to plan long-term interventions. In Afghanistan and Sudan, donor funding often bypasses grassroots GESI actors in favour of larger INGOs with stronger financial management systems.

Rising country costs. The study revealed that in some contexts, such as Myanmar and Sudan, local organisations are constrained by small project budgets that often fail to account for local inflation rates; a critical oversight that significantly diminishes their real value over time. This issue is particularly acute in current Myanmar's high-inflation environments, where project budgets can drastically decrease during a project's lifecycle. In Myanmar, the ongoing civil war has also disrupted supply chains, reduced production, and increased the cost of essential goods. The local currency (*kyat*) has experienced substantial depreciation against the US dollar, losing nearly 70% of its value since the military coup in February 2021. This instability fuels inflation and makes it difficult for local organisations to operate effectively within allocated budgets

➢ ***In response to these barriers, key informants identified several opportunities including**: **i) improving financing quality for NGOs and specifically GESI actors** including longer funding cycles and multi-year, predictable, and flexible funding including "pass-on" of overheads by UN/INGOs; and ii) **diversifying financing channels and modalities including direct to central government** in non-conflict contexts.*

3.5 Socio-Cultural

Social norms limiting the engagement of GESI actors. Social norms in several of the deep dive countries (i.e., Myanmar, Afghanistan, Kenya, and Nepal) act as a barrier to more gender-responsive social protection. For example, while women's organisations and networks in Myanmar advocate for gender mainstreaming, societal resistance to gender equality persists. The study suggests women's organisations face considerable challenges in achieving equitable representation and influence within the broader civil society landscape. Similarly, LNGOs in Kenya and Nepal reported that deeply rooted patriarchal structures and gender biases prevent women and other marginalised groups from accessing social protection programmes. For example, "traditional roles" can restrict women from making decisions, taking leadership roles or accessing financial resources, even when they are primary beneficiaries. Finally, GESI actors in Lebanon highlighted that despite progress initiatives including the National Disability Allowance (NDA), stigma and a lack of rights awareness persists amongst communities, and they have limited influence in progressing a "rights-based narrative."

In Kenya, social norms and discriminatory practices were identified as barriers by both international and local actors. For example, international actors reported that most local actor organisations including women's organisations are male headed. This may hinder effective implementation and advocacy for gender-responsive or transformative social protection programming. Further, local NGOs reported that "*culturally managing boys*" in social protection programmes is quite difficult and these have a high dropout rate. For instance, a local NGO key informant reported that boys represented 20% of the beneficiaries at the start of a social protection programme but by the end, most had dropped out, and boys comprised only 2% of the beneficiaries.

➢ ***In response to this barrier, key informants identified several opportunities including**: **i) linking social protection to broader gender and disability rights frameworks** to enhance acceptance of inclusive policies (e.g., Myanmar, Sudan); **ii) integrating community-led GESI awareness campaigns into social protection programmes** to shift social protection from*

"charity" to a "right" (e.g., Nepal, Afghanistan); and ii) ***leveraging Self Help Groups*** *as an untapped channel to share information and challenge social norms (e.g., Afghanistan, Myanmar).*

3.6 Priorities for Support

In addition to identifying challenges and opportunities, key informants across the six countries were asked to identify specific priorities for support for their stakeholder group. These are summarised in *Table 2* and inform the recommendations in *Section 4*.

Table 2: Local Actor Specific Priorities

National government	• **Support the establishment & implementation of accessible digital systems for social protection programming** e.g., mobile applications for service delivery and collecting beneficiary satisfaction feedback • **Provide technical support** in areas such as advocacy, fundraising, monitoring & evaluation • **Provide capacity strengthening** to relevant ministries on GESI social protection • **Support dedicated budgets** in all projects for local NGO/GESI actor development & leadership enhancement
Subnational government	• **Provide capacity strengthening on**: i) GESI approaches; ii) implementing responsive & inclusive programmes; and iii) conducting monitoring effectively • **Support access to technological tools** e.g., beneficiary tracking systems, digitised payment platforms, and mobile-based data collection • **Support nationwide consultations** with different stakeholders to redesign programmes to ensure effectiveness (i.e., inclusion, equality, responsiveness & sustainability)
Local NGOs	• **Institutionalise local NGO roles** in policy frameworks • **Provide access to technology tools** that facilitate remote working, collaboration, and minimise physical risks • **Invest in longer project cycles** to ensure staff retention & commitment • **Coordinate social protection strategies** that integrate GESI and synchronise projects across organisations • **Support engagement with banks and financial institutions** to facilitate safer and more accessible financial channels for unregistered CSOs, including mobile banking/offshore accounts
GESI actors	• **Support awareness campaigns on gender and disability rights** across programming • **Use diplomatic leverage to push for greater civil space** including protection for actors facing restrictions (e.g., women's organisations) • **Provide advisory support** for incorporating gender perspectives into technical interventions • **Institutionalise** the role of women's organisations and networks through policies
Community-based organisations (CBOs)	• **Help CBOs attain legal status** to strengthen their roles in SP programming, especially in crisis contexts where international actors have limited access. • **Recognise the role of community-based informal social protection structures** and include them in programme design of SP projects.

Finally, country-specific priorities for support are summarised in *Table 3.* Further detail is shared in *Annex G.*

Table 3: Country-Specific Priorities

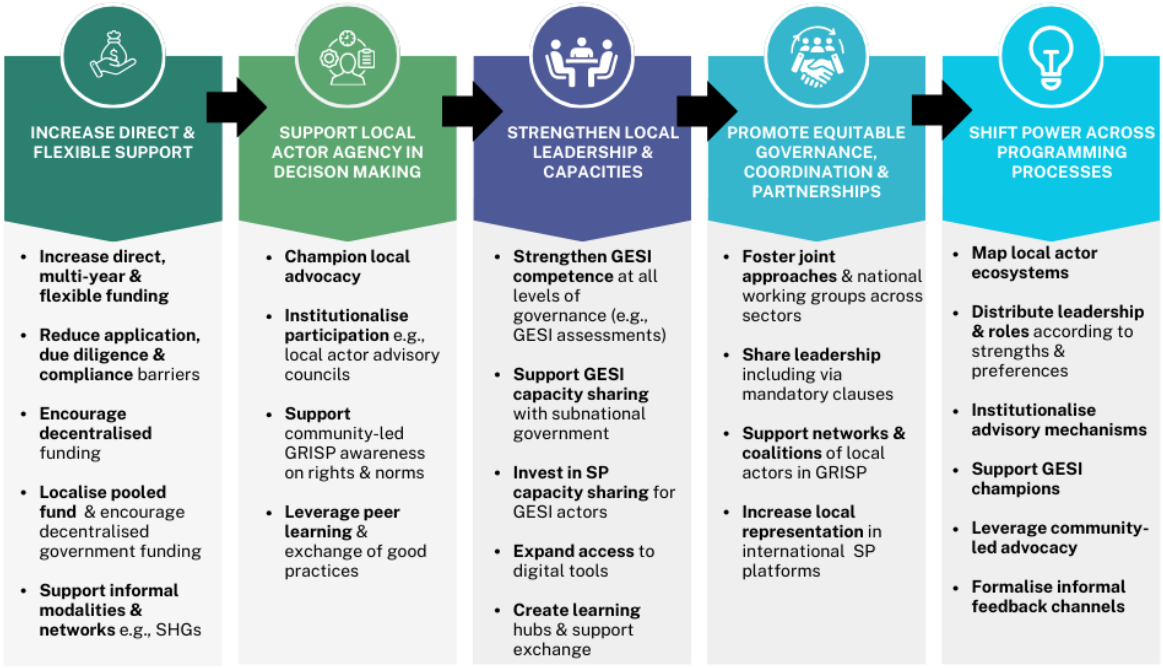
AFGHANISTAN
LNGOs: awareness & capacity strengthening (e.g., policy advocacy, project management, delivery, monitoring) including online options given women's mobility restrictions
Youth Organisations: SP awareness raising & training to increase skills & agency across programming
KENYA

National government: establishing digital systems; capacity strengthening on advocacy and M&E
Subnational government: provision of technological tools (e.g., beneficiary tracking systems, digitised payment platforms & mobile-based data collection tools), to enable more efficient delivery of SP services
LNGOs: technical capacity strengthening on SP systems, long-term funding for programmes, & facilitation of coordination/partnership with government
LEBANON
National government (MoSa): **capacity strengthening for units** (e.g., gender/disability); **support to establish regular consultation platforms** (e.g., with CSOs/WLOs/OPDs) across all stages; **support to strengthen coordination with Social Development Centres** (to improve outreach, beneficiary engagement & localise SP delivery); **support to develop a national M&E and data system** that captures data & input from local actors, allowing real-time programme tracking & adaptive management
Subnational government (SDC): **capacity strengthening on SP programming** (e.g., outreach, local coordination & programme delivery); **capacity strengthening on applying GESI approaches** in outreach, targeting & grievance handling to ensure responsiveness to women/PWD priorities **provision of operational tools & resources** to fulfil roles in facilitating beneficiary engagement, community awareness & grievance readdress
LNGOs: technical capacity strengthening on SP policy analysis, participatory programme design & monitoring, ensuring both disability & gender inclusion are fully embedded
MYANMAR
LNGOs: access to technology and tools that facilitate remote work and collaboration; **dedicated project budgets** for organisational development & access to flexible funding; **emergency funding for relocation**, digital security training & remote operational support for CSOs at risk of asset confiscation or persecution; **support to engage with banks/financial institutions** to facilitate safer and more accessible financial channels for unregistered CSOs; **assistance to navigate restrictive legal frameworks** by funding legal aid; **diplomatic leverage** to push for greater civic space
CBOs (including SHGs & VSLAs): help attaining legal status to facilitate access to funding opportunities and resources; **flexible funding** to support immediate needs & long-term organisational strengthening; **capital injections** to enable internal group loans & support group enterprises (e.g., poultry, cooperative framing of cash crops; **help developing user-friendly disability registration systems** for cash transfer/SP programmes; **training programmes** (e.g., financial management, leadership, conflict resolution, project management) including remote training to help adapt to displacement challenges; **technical assistance** for vocational income opportunities; **guidance on personal safety/conflict de-escalation,** psychosocial support, conflict-responsive approaches & emergency preparedness; **help investing in communications tools & technologies** to support cohesion/coordination given infrastructure challenges; **support with crisis-responsive savings mechanisms** (e.g., mobile banking, pooled fund); **support implementing community-led mental health & PSS services** to address conflict impacts conflict
NEPAL
Subnational government: capacity strengthening on SP approaches & community mobilisation; help coordinating with national government & LNGOs; operational budget for regular M&E of programmes
CBOs: legal status for CBOs in order to strengthen their agency in SP programming; provide financial resources; **technical capacity strengthening** on SP programming
SUDAN
Subnational government: involvement in decision making forums of international SP programmes
LNGOs: a capacity strengthening plan on fundraising, reporting, financial management, context analysis, presentation skills, M&E, outreach & public relations; **support to strengthen internal governance and capacity** to increase funding eligibility; **help institutionalising roles** in national SP policies
CBOs (women's networks): **support formalising of grassroots women's organisations** to attain legal status to operate freely including in hard-to-reach areas

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

This section builds upon the local and international actor identified opportunities for enhancing the role of local actors *and* the priorities for support identified by local actors. It shares practical recommendations for enhancing the role of local actors in gender-responsive and inclusive social protection.

Figure 1: Summary of Recommendations



4.1 Increase Direct and Flexible Support to Local Actors

Across all deep dive countries, key informants highlighted reliance on indirect funding channelled via international intermediaries through short-term projects, which creates a cascade of challenges for local actors and limits their ability to plan long-term, inclusive, and responsive initiatives whilst limiting the engagement of GESI actors across all policy and programming processes. In response to these challenges, it is recommended to:

- **Shift funding modalities.** Move away from indirect, short-term, and intermediary-led funding towards direct, multi-year, and flexible funding for local actors, including GESI actors (e.g., women's organisations, OPDs, CBOs), subnational governments; and influence international intermediaries through funding agreements to "pass on" overhead funding to local actors.
- **Reduce due diligence barriers.** Simplify application, risk management, and reporting processes to make funding more accessible to local actors (with special tracks for small organisations), whilst shifting trust-based accountability systems,[11] and harmonise requirements across funding partners
- **Encourage decentralised funding.** Help establish government funding mechanisms that allow subnational actors to apply for direct resources.

[11] A shift to trust-based approaches, fosters a sense of shared responsibility and promotes more proactive and sustainable approach to compliance by encouraging local actor engagement (e.g., prioritising outcomes, trust building, and narrative reporting) rather than process-based approaches, which promote rigid reporting approaches (e.g., log frames). Application processes could also be streamlined e.g., a light-touch" grant application track for local organisations with simplified eligibility criteria, shorter proposal templates, and technical support during the application phase.

- **Localise pooled funding.** Establish pooled funding mechanisms managed by consortia/coalition of local actors rather than international intermediaries allowing local intermediaries to metabolise and channel funding to grassroots actors.
- **Increase support for informal systems.** Provide flexible resources for informal, community-driven social protection mechanisms (e.g., mutual aid and self-help groups), especially in emergency and conflict contexts, where formal structures are weakened by conflict, and solutions for banking restrictions and sanctions are needed.
- **Strengthen informal networks.** Support the resilience and role of grassroots and Mutual Aid Groups, particularly in contexts where formal structures are weakened by conflict.
- **Innovate financing modalities.** Identify and support safe, and accessible financial channels for informal or unregistered entities, including partnerships with microfinance institutions.

4.2 Support Local Actor Agency in Policy Framing & Decision-Making

In conflict contexts, government restrictions are limiting the engagement of local actors – including GESI actors – and their ability to operate freely. Social norms further challenge equitable representation including the ability of women's organisations to represent, lead, and influence social protection. In response to these challenges, it is recommended to:

- **Champion local advocacy.** Identify and support government champions for GRISP, and fund local advocacy networks to influence national policy for greater gender-responsiveness and inclusion.
- **Institutionalise participation.** Make local actor consultation and co-responsibility mandatory in social protection policy and programme design, including representation from GESI-focused organisations by establishing formalised mechanisms (e.g., local actor advisory councils or consultation forums).
- **Community-led awareness.** Use grassroots channels such as Self Help Groups, and Girls Advisory Committees to conduct GESI awareness campaigns and challenge exclusionary social norms.
- **Leverage peer learning.** Facilitate the exchange and sharing of best practices among local actors, including cross-country learning where relevant (e.g., Lebanon's disability allowance).

4.3 Strengthen Local Leadership and Capacities

The research highlighted GESI knowledge and capacity gaps for many local actors including national and subnational government alongside SP capacity gaps for GESI actors who are often limited to implementation roles rather than having agency in framing, design, and MEAL. In response to these challenges, it is recommended to:

- **Strengthen GESI competence.** Systematically integrate the collection and use of sex, age, and disability disaggregated data (SADDD), and gender/disability/intersectional analysis into all SP programmes at every level of government, not just for GESI-specific projects, and institutionalising learning by integrating GESI into national training curricula and embedding GESI actors into key SP ministries.
- **Strengthen SP capacities.** Invest in SP-related capacity strengthening for GESI actors *inter alia* engaging in policy discussions, using digital tools and data systems, and ensuring GESI-integrated monitoring, evaluation, and learning (e.g., indicators and audits).
- **Support digital inclusion.** Expand access to digital SP tools and ensure local actors are contracted as service providers in these domains (e.g., biometric registration kits, mobile money platforms, digital payment systems, dashboard reporting systems).
- **Create learning hubs.** Establish and fund regional/national hubs for joint training, digital knowledge exchange, peer-to-peer learning; and support south-south collaboration and exchange.

4.4 Promote Equitable Governance, Coordination and Partnerships

Parallel INGO-dominated systems, notably in conflict contexts, short-term engagement and partnerships with local GESI actors (given their piecemeal involvement in SP programmes) and limited engagement in policy dialogues, coupled with coordination gaps across GESI actors (both government and non-government) limits progress towards clearly defined governance, systems, mechanisms, and processes for GRISP founded on equitable partnerships and coordination across sectors and stakeholders. In response to these challenges, it is recommended to:

- **Avoid parallel systems.** Foster joint approaches and national working groups that integrate humanitarian cash assistance, social protection, risk-informed development, and GESI rather than creating duplicative INGO-led structures.
- **Shared leadership.** Require international partners (INGOs/UN) to co-lead with local actors, including through mandatory co-leadership clauses in funding agreements and shared decision-making bodies.
- **Strengthen networks.** Support broad-based coalitions of local actors to collaborate, share resources, experience, and skills, and scale initiatives across relevant sectors (e.g., DRR, climate, education, health), and mobilise community groups (e.g., Self Help Groups).
- **Enhance representation.** Increase local actor representation in international SP platforms, forums, and policy dialogues, for example through sponsored local delegations.

4.5 Shift Power Across Programming Processes

Local actors highlighted the dominance of INGOs across the SP ecosystem, particularly in funding decision making and programme framing and design. They confirmed that local actors are often relegated to subcontracted service providers rather than equal partners. Similarly, GESI actors highlighted that GESI norms in several of the deep dive countries acted as a barrier to local actor agency and leadership. In response to these challenges, it is recommended to:

- **Map local ecosystems.** Conduct mapping[12] of local actors, including GESI and private sector organisations, to better leverage their unique capacities, expand their roles, and ensure equitable partnerships.
- **Distribute leadership.** Assign programming roles according to the comparative strengths and preferences of different local actors (following a separation of functions analysis), allowing them to lead in areas such as identifying priorities, targeting, benefit determination, and monitoring.
- **Institutionalise advisory mechanisms.** Establish legally mandated local advisory boards at both national and subnational levels with genuine influence over programme design and budgets.
- **Support GESI Champions.** Cultivate networks of GESI champions and representatives; and support community mechanisms (e.g., Girls Advisory Committees) to ensure marginalised voices in decision-making whilst also engaging men, boys, and community leaders as allies for change.
- **Leverage community-led advocacy through informal networks to raise awareness of rights**, including linking SP to broader gender and disability rights frameworks to disseminate rights-based messaging through storytelling, testimonials, and interactive media on the value of GRISP (e.g., via SHG leaders, community radio hosts, local influences, and religious leaders).
- **Formalise informal feedback channels.** Transform informal grassroots feedback into formal mechanisms, ensuring CBOs are systematically included in programme monitoring.
- **Support locally-led responsive crisis programming.** Ensure that all crisis social protection measures (e.g., cash assistance) are locally designed and delivered in a gender-responsive and inclusive manner.

[12] This can build on the high-level mapping of local actors carried out in each deep dive country.

5. CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

Local actors are already playing critical roles in supporting more gender-responsive and inclusive social protection systems but their full potential is constrained by system-wide barriers. Whilst they already play a significant role – both formally and informally – in delivering programmes, they are generally sidelined in framing and designing policies and initiatives as well as in monitoring and evaluation. Whilst national governments typically lead policy formulation in more stable context, as seen in Kenya and Nepal, technical units responsible for marginalised groups (e.g., women and people with disabilities) are not fully integrated into decision making. Similarly, subnational governments primarily act as implementers with limited decision-making power. In conflict-affected countries including Sudan, Myanmar and Afghanistan, international actors often dominate social protection programming, and restrictions to LNGOs further limits the agency of local non-governmental actors including GESI actors.

Despite these challenges, there is significant potential for local actors on the frontline of social protection to play a more central role. National governments could enhance subnational government involvement in programme design and governance to better reflect local priorities, for example in Nepal, where subnational governments have successfully adapted the design of social protection programmes to better target beneficiaries. LNGOs and CBOs, particularly those focused on gender equality and social inclusion (GESI), could be more systematically engaged in framing social protection policies rather than limited to side-line advocacy and informal feedback channels. Further, community-owned informal social protection models, such as Emergency Response Rooms in Sudan, and Mutual Aid Groups, which are particularly active in conflict contexts such as Myanmar, Sudan, and Afghanistan, could be recognised, funded, and legitimised as catalysts of locally led social protection.

GESI actors currently play a limited role in social protection decision-making, but they have the potential to lead efforts in advocacy, framing, programme design including targeting, monitoring and evaluation. Women-led organisations in Kenya, Sudan, and Lebanon have advocated for more gender-responsive policies but remain largely excluded from formal decision-making. In Lebanon, organisations for persons with disabilities (OPDs) have been instrumental in raising awareness about the *National Disability Allowance* programme, yet they are not formally integrated into programme governance. When given the opportunity, GESI actors have demonstrated their ability to enhance outreach, improve targeting mechanisms, and increase accountability, as seen in Sudan, where grassroot women's organisations provided direct aid to high-risk groups amid ongoing conflict. Similarly, in Myanmar, women-led organisations were instrumental in identifying the needs of displaced communities following Cyclone Mocha, demonstrating their ability to influence targeting and beneficiary registration. In several countries including Sudan, informal Mutual Aid Groups, including women-led initiatives, have emerged as crucial informal social protection actors, mobilising resources to support internally displaced people and marginalised groups.

Several barriers however, hinder local actor engagement in social protection, including restrictive political environments, limited direct funding, and weak institutional frameworks. In Afghanistan, local NGOs have lost their women staff members due to government restrictions, severely impacting their ability to implement gender-responsive and inclusive programmes. In Myanmar, the military government requires NGOs to register and obtain approval for funding and partnerships, making it difficult for local actors, especially GESI organisations, to operate. Additionally, reliance on indirect funding channelled via international intermediaries through short-term projects, creates a cascade of challenges for local actors including limiting their long-term engagement and ability to plan long-term interventions and strengthen their own capacities.

Despite these barriers, there are significant opportunities to strengthen the engagement of local actors in more gender responsive and inclusive social protection. Study recommendations included: **i) increasing direct and flexible support to local actors** to ensure multi-year, flexible funding whilst reducing due diligence and compliance barriers, and supporting local intermediary modalities and informal community groups and mechanisms, to ensure greater autonomy and sustainability; **ii) supporting local actor agency in policy framing and decision making** including identifying government champions, supporting advocacy for GRISP including community-led awareness campaigns on rights, and

institutionalising local actor participation in framing; **iii) strengthening local leadership and capacities** including investing in peer-to-peer mentoring notably in gender-responsive and inclusive design, monitoring, and evaluation and supporting the use of digital tools; **iv) promoting equitable governance, coordination, and partnerships** to reduce piecemeal involvement of local actors in SP programmes and ensure collaboration across sectors, levels of governance, and between GESI actors; and **v) shifting power across programming processes** by understanding the local actor ecosystem, carrying out a separation of functions to identify capacities, priorities, and complementarities, supporting emerging community-centred and informal mechanisms (e.g., community advisory committees, Self Help Groups, Emergency Rooms) and facilitating GESI networks and advocacy.

Moving forward, it will be important to expand the initial high-level mapping of local actors and their potential roles in the deep dive countries and more broadly to help strengthen the local ecosystem of social protection actors. This should be followed by a local actor engagement plan to help mobilise, convene, network, and support local actors including GESI actors, best placed to co-design equitable social protection programmes. Concomitantly, reviewing policy and institutional frameworks, financing mechanisms, partnership modalities, management practices, and delivery practices at headquarter and country level should underpin systemic shifts in funding, power, and social protection processes to support local actor agency. In addition, developing a plan to catalyse and scale emerging good practices including informal social protection mechanisms such as mutual aid groups, will harness currently underutilised models. Finally, whilst this study has begun to close critical knowledge gaps on the roles of local actors, further research is needed on the effectiveness and impact of different local actors and intermediary models in delivering SP programmes, the integration of informal SP into formal systems, and the sustainability & scalability of local actor engagement in SP.

Localisation of social protection requires a systematic shift that recognises local actors as not only implementers but key decision makers. Although international organisations and national governments have historically led policy formulation and decision-making, the experiences from Afghanistan, Kenya, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nepal, and Sudan show that diverse local actors (including GESI-focused organisations) are already playing an important role both formally and informally. If their knowledge, skills, and capacities are fully leveraged, they have the potential to significantly enhance social protection systems and realise transformative impacts. Addressing structural barriers including policies, funding modalities, exclusionary practices, and social norms is necessary to shift the balance of power towards a more locally driven and inclusive model, with local actors transitioning from peripheral implementers to central architects of social protection systems that are more effective, inclusive, responsive, equitable, timely, connected, and sustainable.

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