Why it Matters

Tackling systematic inequality and exclusion. Social protection has the potential to transform lives by lifting the most marginalised – particularly women and girls – out of poverty, reducing vulnerability to shocks, and addressing entrenched social exclusion. However, most social protection systems fall short of achieving gender equality or meaningful change for those most affected by crisis and chronic disadvantage. Persistent barriers – including high rates of informal and unpaid work, and the enduring gender pay gaps – continue to exclude women and girls from adequate social protection. Without a gender and social inclusion lens and without the involvement of critical local GESI actors, social protection systems may reinforce, rather than reduce existing inequalities.

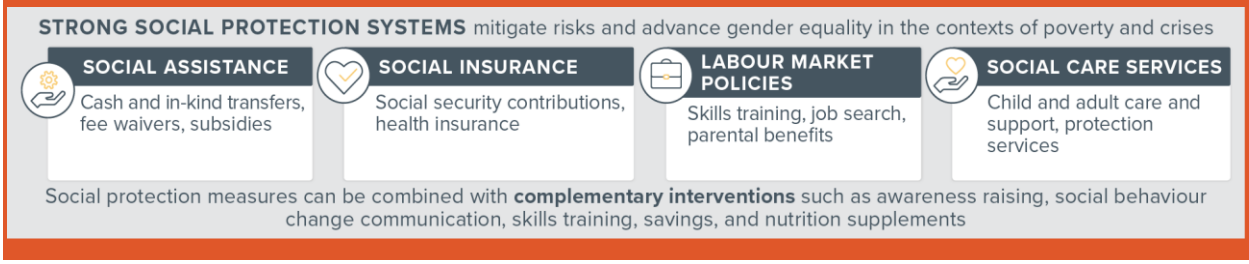
Harnessing local knowledge and networks. Local actors, including GESI specialists, bring crucial contextual understanding and trusted community connections to social protection design and implementation. Their involvement ensures that programmes are attuned to local realities, reach the most excluded populations, and foster greater trust and uptake.

Improved efficiency, coverage & accountability. Evidence also shows that local actors can deliver programmes more cost-efficiently, fill coverage gaps, and drive last-mile outreach, registration, and advocacy. Despite their strengths however, local actors are often restricted to operational roles and rarely participate in strategic decision-making or programme design. Elevating their role from peripheral implementers to central leaders is essential for creating more effective, inclusive, equitable, accountable and sustainable social protection.

Shifting agency & leadership. When engaged as decision-makers, local actors and notably representative organisations, ensure social protection systems tackle the root causes of inequality and exclusion, whilst strengthening accountability, feedback mechanisms, and equitable distribution of resources. GRISP is not just about delivering benefits; it is about placing the agency, needs, and leadership of women and marginalised groups at the centre of a social protection systems approach. Too often, women and marginalised groups are viewed as passive beneficiaries, rather than agents of change and decision makers. Locally-led GRISP redefines their roles, recognising local actors – including community and GESI actors - as architects of social protection.

The transformative power of GRISP. Evidence shows that social protection can significantly enhance women's economic participation, savings, health access, and decision-making power. A "twin-track" approach - integrating gender equality and social inclusion priorities into mainstream programmes, whilst providing targeted support for specific groups, such as persons with disabilities, enables social protection to address intersecting vulnerabilities and the root causes of exclusion. Until now the evidence base on the role of local actors - including GESI actors - in transformative social protection was anecdotal. Deep dive research across six countries found that systematic shifts are needed to recognise local actors not only as peripheral implementers but key decision makers with agency and leadership for more effective, equitable, inclusive, responsive, timely, connected, and sustainable social protection.

What is Social Protection



Who are the Local Actors

Local actors are broadly defined 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

What are Local Actors Roles

CURRENT ROLES	POTENTIAL ROLES
NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS: **lead social protection policy formulation** in more stable contexts. Subnational governments primarily act as **implementers** and rarely shape priorities.	**Integrate technical units** (e.g., gender, disability, youth) for more responsive, inclusive, and coordinated policies and programmes and **enhance subnational involvement** to reflect local priorities.
LOCAL NGOs: often **consulted** but rarely co-lead strategic decision making, especially in internationally-driven programmes where they are **mostly tasked with operational activities** (e.g., targeting, beneficiary identification).	**Translate grassroots needs into policy frameworks** & locally appropriate solutions and **transition from implementers to co-leaders** in programme design & governance.
PRIVATE SECTOR: primarily **facilitate payments,** especially where state or NGO reach is limited.	Expand role to **deliver innovative, accessible & digitised solutions**.
CBOs: play a **vital role in last-mile outreach & informal safety nets** (e.g., Self Help Groups), notably in crisis contexts, but are often **excluded from strategic decisions**.	**Move from informal roles to formalised partnerships,** framing policies, increasing reach and inclusion, and co-leading community-centred feedback & accountability mechanisms.
GESI ACTORS: advocate for inclusion, raise awareness-raising on rights, support registration, verification and distribution, yet their formal influence is typically limited to GESI-focused or disaster response programmes.	**More central role in programme framing** (e.g., shaping priorities); **co-designing programmes** (e.g., deciding targeting, entitlements, transfer processes), co-leading policy & social norms advocacy, supporting peer learning on GESI & inclusive monitoring

Policy and Practice Tips



- **Increase direct, flexible funding.** Enhance both the quality and quantity of funding whilst simplifying application and compliance requirements including for GESI actors.
- **Support pooled and community funding.** Expand localised pooled funding mechanisms (e.g., coalitions) and invest in community-driven initiatives such as women's Self Help Groups (SHGs).
- **Institutionalise local leadership.** Embed local actor co-leadership in policy formulation and programme design from the onset, including formalising roles of GESI and grassroots actors.
- **Strengthen capacity sharing.** Invest in leadership and technical skills including peer-to-peer capacity sharing on the integration of disaggregated data, GESI analysis, and more inclusive processes including M & E (especially for government actors), and technical SP capabilities for GESI actors (including the use of digital tools).
- **Promote cross-sectoral coordination.** Foster collaboration across government departments (e.g., disability, gender, youth), among non-governmental local actors via dedicated platforms and mechanisms (e.g., youth committees), and among GESI actors.
- **Shift power dynamics in programming.** Mandate co-leadership in donor agreements; map local ecosystems, separate functions based on preferences and capacities, clearly define roles including for GESI actors; and establish advisory boards and formal feedback mechanisms (e.g., via SHGs).

Key References

- **Synthesis Report:** The Role of Local Actors in Social Protection in Crisis Contexts
- **Synthesis Report:** The Role of Local actors in Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Social Protection
- **Country Reports:** Afghanistan, Lebanon, Kenya, Myanmar, Nepal, Sudan [unpublished]