



Investment Concept Note

Investment Concept Title: Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion Support Unit

Estimated Start date: December 2025

Estimated End date: December 2030 (initial period)

Total proposed DFAT funding: An initial period of five years for up to AUD33 million (GST inclusive) with an option for extension for a period of up to four years.

A. Development Context (What is the problem?)

- › Achieving gender equality, disability equity and social inclusion are central to Australia's development efforts. DFAT's '10 Year Future Capability Plan (May 2023) noted a lack of development capacity in DFAT, extending to capability on Gender Equality, Disability Equity and Social Inclusion (GEDSI). Strengthened DFAT capability on GEDSI is needed to meet the government's policy commitments.
- › Presently, DFAT officers obtain gender equality and disability equity technical advice (TA) through two separate technical helpdesks: 1) specialist disability TA is provided by the Disability Inclusive Development helpdesk (DID4All) implemented by CBM Australia (CBMA, NGO); and 2) specialist gender equality TA is provided by the Support Unit for Gender Equality (SURGE) operated by DT Global (managing contractor).
- › There are currently no specialist helpdesks covering TA on LGBTQIA+ rights in development, or First Nations approaches to development. Demand for TA in these areas is expected to increase with the release of new international strategies.
- › Both DID4ALL and SURGE will end in 2025, creating an opportunity for a new integrated GEDSI support unit.

B. Strategic Intent and Rationale (Why should Australia invest?)

- › Australia's International Development Policy makes gender equality and disability equity core to development. New and forthcoming international strategies on gender equality, disability equity, and LGBTQIA+ human rights will bring elevated ambition in GEDSI development and humanitarian programming, and increased focus on performance and accountability on GEDSI.
- › The reinstatement of the target for 80 per cent of all development investments to address gender equality effectively and the requirement for new investments of \$3 million and above to include gender equality objectives has increased demand for TA and capability development on gender equality. Similarly, new policy positions and reforms to be introduced through the new disability and LGBTQIA+ strategies are expected to generate a surge in requests for TA in these areas. Stakeholders monitor DFAT's gender equality and disability equity policy implementation closely.
- › Implementation of these strategies will require intersectional approaches to development. Intersectionality is nascent within DFAT's development program.
- › A successor GEDSI TA mechanism which builds on the success and redresses the challenges of the SURGE and DID4All helpdesks will support DFAT staff in meeting DFAT's existing and forthcoming GEDSI policy ambitions, commitments and requirements and support quality development programming.
- › The investment is ODA eligible.

C. Proposed Outcomes and Investment Options (What?)

- › The proposed overarching goal of this investment will be to *improve the effectiveness of Australia's development program through advancement of gender equality, disability equity and social inclusion.*

- › The proposed End of Program Outcome of the GEDSI support unit is that *DFAT has strengthened capacity and capability to more effectively advance gender equality, disability equity and social inclusion in development and humanitarian programming.*
- › This will be achieved through a central GEDSI support unit providing high-quality intersectional TA and other services to support GEDSI integration across DFAT. Potential for the support unit to support Official Development Assistance (ODA) programming, non-ODA and hybrid programming will be explored during the design phase.
- › The GEDSI support unit will recruit and manage a panel of specialists with gender, disability and social inclusion technical expertise (including LGBTQIA+, First Nations approaches, and other emerging areas) across all sectors relevant to DFAT’s work. As a flexible mechanism, it will respond to emerging areas of diversity and equity and will support locally led development through the recruitment of panel members from the Indo Pacific region.
- › The GEDSI support unit will deliver a range of enabling GEDSI functions to support DFAT’s implementation of the International Development Policy and international strategies. It will be demand driven, but also able to initiate analytical pieces to inform DFAT’s GEDSI work. It will improve the reach and capability of the Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion Branch (GEB) to deliver GEDSI outcomes for government and improve the quality, effectiveness and results from Australian ODA.
- › Support unit functions will be defined during the design and will retain flexibility throughout the investment. Functions are likely to include:
 - Short, medium, and long-term TA, including design, reviews and evaluation, GEDSI analyses, and quality assurance of Investment Performance Reporting
 - Capability development of DFAT staff
 - Communications to promote DFAT’s GEDSI work to share good practice and learning
 - Managing a curated knowledge hub with GEDSI resources (building on DID4All and SURGE websites)
 - Monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) on DFAT’s GEDSI work
 - Procurement of reasonable accommodations (e.g. Auslan interpretation, easy to read services).
- › The design process will give special consideration to the support unit’s potential to engage security cleared GEDSI advisors to be embedded within DFAT in Canberra and at posts in program implementation or technical advisory roles, given probity risks.
- › GEB will review the GEDSI support unit after 5 years of operation to assess effectiveness. Based on the findings of the review, a decision will be made about a program additional extension. A possible four-year extension (to 2034) will require a design refresh informed by the review.
- › The investment will have gender equality and disability equity as principal objectives. A central support unit covering GEDSI will encourage an intersectional approach, broaden opportunities for learning, and creating efficiencies.
- › The GEDSI support unit will mainstream climate change. The design will be informed by an assessment of climate risks and opportunities and outline how the investment addresses identified climate risks and opportunities.

D. Implementation Arrangements and Delivery Approach (How will DFAT deliver it and engage?)

- › The GEDSI support unit will build on lessons learnt from DID4All, SURGE and other DFAT helpdesks (such as the Specialist Health Service, social protection, and governance helpdesks) to identify the most efficient operational model enabling co-payment of services. An [independent review of DID4All](#) and MEL data from SURGE will inform the GEDSI support unit design.
- › Lessons from reviews of other DFAT helpdesks include the importance of monitoring TA impact; strategic use of program Steering Committees; balancing proactive versus responsive TA; avoidance of duplication between helpdesks; and effectiveness of different approaches to building DFAT’s internal capacity.

- › The design process will include consultations with existing and potential DFAT GEDSI support unit users, other DFAT helpdesks, and DID4All and SURGE implementing partners and panel members. To identify the most appropriate contracting and operating systems, consultation will include AidWorks and Contracts teams.
- › Three implementation options have been considered for the lifetime of the support unit:
 - **Option One:** GEB (GPU) directly manages the GEDSI support unit, including recruitment and management of the panel; managing operations and MEL; triaging taskings; drafting tasking notes; and managing payments. This option does not offer feasibility or value-for-money given GEB's limited human resourcing. A single GEB member managing the GEDSI support unit would reduce responsiveness to DFAT's needs, putting at risk the implementation of GEDSI policy commitments. A GEB-managed support unit would require commissioning areas to draft their own tasking notes, placing burden on time-poor staff and reducing the value proposition and use of the support unit.
 - **Option Two:** A grant agreement, in which all support unit costs are covered. GEB's experience shows that this option does not meet DFAT's needs for longer-term engagements that require co-payments, and may disincentivise DFAT investment in GEDSI.

These options have been ruled out as they will not meet DFAT's current and projected needs.

- **Option Three:** Procure an implementing partner, staffed by a core team to deliver the functions of the GEDSI support unit. The core team may include GEDSI specialists, MEL and communications staff, and program management generalists. The implementing partner will understand DFAT's internal processes and requirements. Management of probity risk relating to the implementing partner gaining competitive advantage through access to DFAT information will be addressed during design and managed in implementation.
- › **DFAT's resourcing:** GPU will manage implementation of the support unit. The Senior Specialist Adviser Gender Equality will provide technical leadership. A GEDSI support unit investment manager within GPU will be identified.
- › Core budget will be allocated from GEB for \$3.7 million per year over an initial five years. An additional estimated \$11.5 million of co-funding for use of support unit services will be provided by DFAT commissioning areas on a task-by-task basis. It allows an anticipated increase in GEDSI TA demand following release of new strategies on gender equality, disability equity, and LGBTQIA+ engagement; provides scope for the GEDSI support unit to evolve with emerging priorities; and potentially respond to TA requests beyond ODA.
- › **Governance Framework:** Oversight and cross thematic leadership will be essential. A Steering Committee will provide strategic leadership of GEDSI support unit performance and effectiveness. Responsibilities of the Steering Committee may include advising on effective service delivery; identifying research, analysis and capability building priorities; and acting as an accountability mechanism.
- › Assistant Secretary GEB will Chair the Steering Committee. Members will be representatives from GEB, and other DFAT areas including the Development Effectiveness and Enabling Division (PRD), Office of Southeast Asia, Office of the Pacific, and the Humanitarian Partnerships Division. Learning from DID4All, consideration will be given to roles for OPD experts in the region to provide strategic advice.
- › Program governance will ensure performance monitoring and transparent decision making. Regular budget management meetings will be held with the GEDSI support unit implementing partner. Annual workplans, reports and reviews, an Operations Manual, MEL Framework and Risk and Mitigation Strategies will be delivered. Annual Investment Monitoring Reports and Partner Performance Assessments will be submitted.
- › **Risks:** Based on existing helpdesks management, the risks are identified as follows:

- **Managing Conflict of Interest (COI) and probity:** This includes COI among panel members, for example panel members being included in designs of investments that they may later be approached for implementation; COI and probity of the implementing partner who may tender for contracts that panel members contributed to the design of; and broader access to information and related probity matters.
 - **Operations:** Efficient GEDSI support unit operations will be at risk if the contracting mechanism does not enable co-payments from DFAT by commissioning areas, and the investment is not correctly set up in AidWorks.
 - **Panel:** Poor performance from panel members; lack of available GEDSI panel members; an expansive panel leads to disengagement among members who may not be regularly engaged for work; access of classified documents by panel members.
 - **Handover:** Poor communication and poorly managed handover could lead to a dip in GEDSI support unit use during the inception and start up phase.
- › The Risk Factors Screening Tool and risk register has been completed on AidWorks. The overall risk rating is LOW.

E. What are the next steps?¹

- › The Investment Design Document (IDD) will be finalised.
- › A request for tender will be launched. DFAT will have a briefing for interested tenderers.

¹See [DFAT Design and MEL Standards](#) and the [Investment Design Quality Assessment Tool and Scoring Matrix](#).