

WOMEN IN INCLUSIVE SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC RECOVERY (WISER) - INVESTMENT CONCEPT SUMMARY BRIEF

What is the aim of the WISER program?

The overall goal of WISER is to:

- support a resilient and inclusive economic recovery and sustainable growth in Southeast Asia, where women are at the centre of economic recovery and their economic empowerment is accelerated.

Proposed outcomes are:

- increased workplace gender equality through positive shifts in workplace policies, practices and culture;
- a significantly increased volume of impactful capital is deployed in the region with a gender lens that advances gender equality and women's economic empowerment objectives.

In addition, two thematic outcomes are proposed for particular focus:

- increased women's workforce participation through increased access to childcare services; and
- increased number of women who have access to safe and decent opportunities in emerging growth career pathways, businesses and industries.

Activities to support positive gender norms and a constructive enabling policy environment at the country level will strengthen these outcomes.

What is the strategic intent of the new program?

As recognised by the ASEAN Women Leaders' Summit in November 2020, while ASEAN member economies face different challenges, women will have a pivotal role in building a more cohesive, dynamic, sustainable and inclusive economy post pandemic. Beginning in July 2023, the WISER program will further boost Australia's contribution to and credibility and reputation as a thought leader in women's economic empowerment – through supporting countries in the region to position women at the centre of economic recovery and accelerating opportunities to advance their economic empowerment.

How does the program build on Investing in Women?

The 2021 review of the Investing in Women (IW) program (2016-23, in Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam and Myanmar) validated a continued focus in a successor program on influencing business practices for workplace gender equality, tackling adverse social norms, and using blended finance instruments to move capital with a gender lens. The new program would build on IW's platforms, networks and structures to direct targeted support to selected focus areas and local reform agendas that will have a significant impact. Technical support for legislative and governance reform priorities of ASEAN member states that will impact women's economic empowerment will increase synergy with DFAT's regional and bilateral gender equality priorities.

Maintaining a publicly accessible knowledge hub, monitoring program results and documenting learning, brokering partnerships and networks of influence, providing direct technical support for government policy reforms, and commissioning and disseminating research would continue to build momentum among actors in Southeast Asia towards women's economic empowerment. Australian initiatives such as the Workplace Gender Equality Agency could provide expertise to support program outcomes.

Where will the program operate?

The program may expand to additional Official Development Assistance (ODA) eligible countries such as Cambodia and Laos, and potentially to countries such as Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand who may also benefit from and contribute to efforts to accelerate women's economic empowerment in ASEAN.

In responding to the variety of contexts, needs and opportunities to drive women's economic empowerment, the mix of program inputs will differ from country to country. This will include strategies that tackle systems and structures, and resourcing of influential institutions, advocates and champions who can help to accelerate the momentum for change. Program interventions will be determined with bilateral areas of DFAT, drawing from a menu of options that work together to accelerate women's economic empowerment in their respective contexts.

How will the design accommodate emerging priorities?

As the context will evolve significantly in the period to mid-2023, the design document will be a high-level framework for implementation that is flexible and adaptive rather than a detailed program of specific activities. The design framework will cover a first 4-year phase.

Features of the WISER program – a menu of proposed workstream options available to countries

1: BUSINESS COALITIONS for women’s economic empowerment /workplace gender equality

The program would continue to provide support for Business Coalitions (BCs) established by IW in the Philippines, Indonesia and Vietnam (and possibly Myanmar) to drive gender equality through influential businesses shifting workplace policies, practices and culture. BCs have also played important roles in policy reform advocacy for an enabling legal and regulatory environment for workplace gender equality (WGE).

Beyond the original 4 BCs, this option may also appeal to other countries, perhaps where there is an existing business coalition that would benefit from WGE expertise and support, or in a context where the private sector is interested in exploring WGE services.

This option could be used to support and mutually reinforce work in other streams below – especially ‘influencing norms’ and ‘policy reform’. The business coalitions would potentially contribute to work supporting the two proposed thematic focus areas of childcare and preparing women for the future economy (see below).

2: GENDER LENS INVESTING (GLI) for small and medium enterprises

WISER will continue to support gender lens investing through blended finance initiatives. Under WISER, GLI would not be limited to women-led businesses, but potentially also businesses that promote gender diversity in the workforce and equality in the workplace, businesses that create opportunities for women in value chains, and businesses that provide products and services that intentionally seek to close gender gaps. WISER will stimulate private sector investment in investible businesses that create new opportunities to advance women’s economic empowerment. WISER’s gender lens investing activities will complement and coordinate with other DFAT initiatives that seek to mobilise capital for women and advance women’s economic empowerment.

While IW’s investments were sector agnostic, WISER may identify particular sectors where gender lens investments would help to advance opportunities for women in an emerging growth sector in a country. For example, this option could be used to support and mutually reinforce work under the two proposed thematic focus areas of childcare and supporting women in the future economy (see below). Work under this stream would be underpinned by work to enhance Australia’s influence in building the market in Southeast Asia for GLI (see below).

3: NETWORKS OF INFLUENCE TO ADDRESS GENDER NORMS around women’s economic participation

Research, lessons and insights gained from IW reveal the importance of tackling these norms at individual, community and institutional levels. WISER provides the opportunity to significantly scale partnerships with local organisations to build and connect coalitions and networks of influence working on gender norms that inhibit women’s economic empowerment – including the suggested focus areas of childcare and the future economy (see below). There is also potential to extend WISER’s influence through working with regional coalitions and networks. Synergies with other DFAT programs in the region will be explored. The unique body of research and knowledge products generated under IW around influencing gender norms will be added to by the new program.

4: ENABLING ENVIRONMENT POLICY REFORMS

WISER will support locally identified policy reform agendas that promote women's workforce participation, decent work conditions, skills development and business opportunities. Tangible, technical support to government – directly or in conjunction with other partners – to advance government policy priorities would make a significant contribution to enabling positive policy environments. The work of business coalitions, private sector champions, and of other advocates and networks of influence (see 3 above) will be important to advancing support for reform among policy actors. A supportive policy environment will impact upon success in the other streams of work above, including the ability for women entrepreneurs to access finance and private investment.

CROSS PROGRAM FUNCTIONS

These functions will intersect with country-level activities but will be driven from a cross-function perspective:

A) RESEARCH

The research undertaken through IW has contributed significantly to the evidence base to inform effective approaches to women's economic empowerment by a range of actors. Strategic research that complements the bilateral focuses of the program will continue.

B) KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

IW's existing knowledge hub collects and curates evidence and analysis from global and regional actors. This is a widely accessed resource. Partnerships with universities in the region may help to deepen regional expertise and knowledge in key areas of research. WISER will closely engage with DFAT on key research findings and program learnings to advance DFAT's bilateral policy reform agendas, create opportunities for DFAT dialogue on contemporary gender issues with key actors, and provide entry points for greater knowledge sharing with other DFAT programs.

C) ENHANCING AUSTRALIA'S INFLUENCE IN MARKET BUILDING FOR GENDER LENS INVESTING (GLI)

This will build on IW's work in developing the gender lens investing ecosystem in Southeast Asia and provide Australia and DFAT leverage to influence the impactful application of capital in the region at scale for gender equality outcomes. WISER will provide technical GLI advice to impact investors, regional developmental institutions and, potentially, mainstream capital providers. This ecosystem building function is not addressed by DFAT's other blended finance programs.

EXPLORING A THEMATIC FOCUS

As appropriate to the context, it is proposed that WISER draw upon, link up and channel efforts of the proposed streams of work above to catalyse and progress positive change in one or two tangible areas that seek to position women at the centre of economic recovery and accelerate their economic empowerment. Two proposed areas of focus have been identified. These will need further consideration in a design phase, and during program inception, to reflect analysis of barriers and opportunities at the country level.

1. CHILDCARE

The first area focuses on increasing access to affordable quality childcare for working parents – to contribute to tackling one of the most intractable barriers to women’s workforce participation. The focus will be on formalising the care sector, improving conditions for care workers, and shifting societal attitudes towards the value of ‘care’ and stereotypes about who is responsible for delivering care.

Acknowledging that the childcare sector is vast and requires multiple interventions and strategies to create an accessible, quality and regulated care services sector, it is proposed that WISER use the proposed streams of work above to champion employer-supported childcare and support private sector investments in childcare solutions that are accessible to middle and low-income families. Alongside support to the private sector, WISER is also well positioned to support partners working to influence gender norms around care work and to contribute to policy reform relating to childcare - including decent conditions for care workers.

The design stage will test and validate the viability of this focus area with each of the implementing countries. This will ensure that the design builds on, complements and advances existing efforts to increase affordable access to quality childcare for working parents. The degree of focus in this area and the mix of WISER streams channelled towards it will be informed by country level assessments.

2. FUTURE ECONOMY

The second focus area responds to the risk that women will be left behind as economies in the region recover and transform, thereby widening and deepening gender inequality. This will involve working closely with DFAT Posts to identify opportunities, and consider the levers of WISER to re-skill, up-skill, and invest in women in emerging growth industries.

The program could explore and promote the role of women as investors, entrepreneurs, suppliers, technicians and operators of emerging renewable energy and climate adaptive infrastructure and technologies. It may seek to identify investment opportunities for women in digital, technological, and automotive transformation, which is a key ASEAN priority and is expected to accelerate as the economy recovers. These investments would ideally benefit those who have experienced the most severe consequences of COVID-19 economic disruptions, and those whose jobs have or will be displaced by automation or digital transformation.

As the economic context in Southeast Asia continues to evolve, and before a new program begins in mid-2023, the design must be flexible enough to respond to the pace of transformation at that time, emerging priorities, and economic opportunities per country contexts.

WOMEN in INCLUSIVE SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC RECOVERY
(WISER)

PERIOD: JULY 2023 – JUNE 2027 FUNDING: up to AUD 80M

GOAL

Support a resilient and inclusive economic recovery and sustainable growth in Southeast Asia, where women are at the centre of economic recovery and their economic empowerment is accelerated.

END OF ORIOGRAM
OUTCOMES

Increased workplace gender equality through positive shifts in workplace policies, practices and culture.

Increased women's workforce participation through increased access to childcare services.

Increased number of women who have access to safe and decent opportunities in emerging growth career pathways, businesses and industries.

A significantly increased volume of impactful capital deployed in the region that advances gender equality and women's economic empowerment objectives.

WORKSTREAMS

SUPPORT TO BUSINESS COALITIONS

GENDER LENS INVESTING

ENABLING ENVIRONMENT POLICY REFORMS

NETWORKS OF INFLUENCE/ COALITION BUILDING FOR POSITIVE SOCIAL NORMS

THEMATIC FOCUS
AREAS

AFFORDABLE QUALITY CHILDCARE

WOMEN'S EQUAL PARTICIPATION IN A FUTURE ECONOMY

COUNTRY, REGIONAL AND ASEAN CONTEXT AND PRIORITIES