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GENDER EQUALITY AND

SOCIAL EQUITY (GSE) POLICY

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HELVETAS
Swiss Intercooperation

POSITIONING

This policy document was elaborated through a process of consultation that dove-tailed with the drafting of the organisational strategy of HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation. It also draws lessons from, and builds upon, the pre-merger experiences of both HELVETAS and Intercooperation. Reflecting the vision and values of HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation, it sets out the ways in which we can better focus our work in supporting poor and disadvantaged individuals, particularly women and girls. As a policy document, it is not time bound, but establishes a frame of engagement. A separate GSE strategy outlines how the GSE policy will be put into practice over the coming five years.

CONTEXT

It is a fact that you are more likely to be economically poor if you are a woman and/or are an indigenous person/member of minority ethnic group, practice a minority religion, come from an isolated geographical area, were born into a low social status (caste, bonded labour, etc), are very young or very old, or live with impaired health. Being economically poor tends to be strongly correlated with being socially disadvantaged – that is, experiencing social discrimination and powerlessness.¹ Those in this unequal situation are often unable to exercise their rights or develop their full potential as human beings; this is not only a personal tragedy at individual level but also represents a significant loss in terms of overall social and economic development. Although evidence points to societies that are closer to social equality being better overall, the opposite trend is true today, with social inequalities within countries being on the rise².

Although the way and degree to which women are socially disadvantaged compared to men is different in different country contexts, support for gender equality is in all cases an important aspect of social equity. Numerous micro and macro-level studies show a strong correlation between development performance and women's emancipation in the home and workplace. Recent global reviews of progress in promoting gender equality have revealed progress in many fields – particularly in health, education and participation in the labour force, although advances in political participation have been far less marked³. Yet despite many international declarations on the importance of women's equality⁴, and the existence of supportive international and national legislation, the social reality at country level is that gender inequalities persist, and in many parts of the world, gender gaps are widening⁵. This is acknowledged in the Istanbul Principles for civil society development practice, to which HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation is a signatory. The first two Istanbul Principles⁶ are a commitment to

- Respect and promote human rights and social justice
- Embody gender equality and equity while promoting women's and girls' rights.

HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation adopts a combined approach in striving for gender equality and social equity. The reasons for us doing so are two-fold:

- Gender discrimination is an integral part of social inequity; furthermore where major social inequalities exist, these are often borne to a greater degree by women than men.
- An understanding of gender relations in a given country requires a wider understanding of the social context and power relations, and the way that different cultural beliefs and practices impact on women and men according to their class, caste, ethnicity, religion, age and other relevant social groupings to entrench inequalities.

GENDER EQUALITY OR GENDER EQUITY?

Do we at HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation talk about gender equality or gender equity? The use of the word “equality” here means equal opportunities and equal rights, and as such has gained widespread use. We thus also use it in this sense – whilst recognising that “equality” does not necessarily imply treating women and men in exactly the same way. However, we talk about social equity as this has the implication of fairness or social justice – of trying to redress existing social disadvantages in a pro-active manner.

DEFINITIONS

Gender equality

Gender is a socially constructed definition of roles, behaviours and power relations between women and men, not to be confused with sex (the biological characteristics of women and men)⁷. Our organisational stance in support of gender equality is based on the recognition that women and men have equal rights, and should also have equal opportunities and equal responsibilities in realising their potential. This often entails changed power relations within households, working places, communities and society at large. However, gender equality does not always mean striving for equal numbers of men and women in all activities, or treating men and women in the same way. Men and women often have different needs

KEY PRINCIPLES

> **1. We strive to include the marginalised and excluded**

We inform ourselves about local and wider power dynamics, seeking to ensure that those who have the least space to develop their own development initiatives benefit the most from our interventions.

> **2. We are sensitive to local culture whilst respecting human rights**

In raising awareness about socially-embedded cultural practices and norms that are gender-biased or otherwise discriminatory in nature, we seek to understand the rationale behind them and to find non-discriminatory responses that uphold human rights.

> **3. We intervene in a focused manner**

In working with women and other poor and disadvantaged individuals or groups, we aim to support them to build their human capital, promote their economic empowerment and increase their voice (agency or social and political empowerment).

> **4. We acknowledge the needs and opinions of men and women**

We are aware that changes in gender relations require a changed perception of social norms and expectations amongst both men and women. Furthermore, we acknowledge the fact that men's and women's knowledge and opinions are often different and together provide a more comprehensive picture; we seek to build on this wherever possible.

> **5. Our partnerships are based on shared values**

We are selective in our choice of cooperation partners – government, private and NGO – endeavouring to work with those that share our values with regard to gender equality and social equity as set out here and in the HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation organisational strategy, and to support them in building their capacities accordingly.

> **6. We seek to highlight gender equality and social equity in development policy debates**

We intervene in a targeted manner in policy discussions and campaigns supporting gender equality and social equity in the context of development cooperation.

> **7. We uphold gender equality and diversity in our internal organisation**

Our human resource policy supports gender equality and workforce diversity, and we aim for as gender-balanced a workforce as possible, especially in middle and senior management as well as in our Board of Directors.

> **8. In monitoring and evaluating our efforts, we seek to learn and improve**

Through our planning, monitoring and evaluation procedures we seek to continuously learn from experience and improve our performance in promoting gender equality and social equity – also sharing with and learning from others working in the same field.

and priorities, face different constraints, have different aspirations and contribute to development in different ways. It is important to recognise, respect and work with both feminine and masculine perceptions. Furthermore, gender relations are often strongly interlinked with other power relations based on difference, such as ethnicity, age and education, and need to be addressed in a holistic, context-specific manner: in our programme activities, in our collaboration with partners, and in our workforce.

Social Equity

Social equity can be understood in different ways in different contexts, but we take it to encompass the upholding of human rights and the combating of social injustice. We seek to reduce or remove the unequal life chances that prevent poor and disadvantaged individuals and

groups from playing an active role in their personal, community and societal development. Such inequalities may relate to the individuals themselves, in terms of their health, education and skills; to social practices that discriminate particular ethnic groups, castes or religions, women or persons of different sexual orientation (including those of “third gender”); and to ways of community organisation and political systems that are dominated by elites and allow little or no room for the voice of others. Another important aspect of social equity is supporting the socially marginalised in gaining secure access to natural, financial and other resources. Social equity is also relevant within our own organisation, both amongst our Country Programme and Head Office staff, in that we seek to promote workforce diversity, champion human rights, and to encourage inter-cultural communication.

IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR WORK

> 1. We strive to include the marginalised and excluded

Our experience shows that it is generally easier to work with groups and individuals (often men) who have some assets, education, and are willing to take risks because they can afford to do so. Working with such people is a valid part of development efforts, but they should not be those who benefit most from our activities. We are committed to including women, poor and disadvantaged individuals, and are aware that this requires a pro-active effort. Thus all country programmes:

- carefully analyse their local context, identify the most poor and disadvantaged groups, and systematically ensure that they are at the centre of the programme and benefit the most from direct and indirect programme support – without excluding and thus alienating more wealthy and powerful groups;
- aim for a balance between support for broadly beneficial social and economic development, and specific, targeted support for poor and disadvantaged groups – especially girls and women.

We uphold a “do no harm approach”, ensuring that none of our interventions exacerbate conflict or have a detrimental impact on the most poor and disadvantaged. Furthermore, we are aware that disadvantage and discrimination between individuals occur within households as well as at the wider community or societal level. We design out interventions with this in mind.

> 2. We are sensitive to local culture whilst respecting human rights

Gender norms and stereotypical expectations based on ethnicity, caste and other identities are often deeply embedded in cultural norms, leading to a perceived tension or even incompatibility between supporting gender equality and social equity and respecting local culture. However, in all countries of the world, culture is dynamic and evolving – sometimes at a fast pace, sometimes more slowly. Furthermore, different individuals in society often have different viewpoints, influenced by factors such as their own values, world vision, and background. This provides an opportunity to engage in discussion and to facilitate self-reflection, taking the human rights based approach.

- As part of our country level planning, we analyse and attempt, as far as possible, to address gender roles at all levels - household, social group, local community and within wider society. This often entails specific

interventions that empower women. We also analyse wider patterns of social inequality and consider how one influences the other.

- When challenging existing cultural practices or beliefs, we seek to work in a sensitive manner, and support local organisations and individuals who share our values.
- In countries in which it is difficult to access women directly, we adopt culturally appropriate approaches (such as seeking the support of tribal and/or religious leaders, working through respected elderly women or teachers, etc).
- We uphold the dignity of women and men, and take a stance against gender-based violence.
- Where useful and feasible, we promote institutional and wider public exchange on the topic of social discrimination based on gender or other criteria – by, for example, convening local speakers with differing views to discuss discriminatory practices and norms in the context of today’s society.

> 3. We intervene in a focused manner

Within each country programme, we aim to focus our support for women, poor and disadvantaged individuals according to three main thrusts,

- building their human capital through improved health (expected through access to drinking water and sanitation), education (formal and informal) and skills development (vocational training and other capacity building) with a particular focus on the younger generation, building their capacities for the future;
- promoting their economic empowerment through access to resources (especially land and affordable credit), to labour markets (especially better paid jobs), gaining equal pay for equal work; and developing income-generating opportunities;
- facilitating their increased voice (agency) - gaining representation in local user group committees and similar fora, but especially in important community and/or political decision-making positions.

Individual projects may focus on one or more thrusts, but the country programme as a whole should seek to cover all three. Wherever possible and constructive, we support initiatives responding to strategic empowering needs such as securing tenure over resources, and legislative reform in favour of women and/or marginalised groups. We also seek to build the social capital of women, poor and disadvantaged individuals.

> 4. We acknowledge the needs and opinions of men and women

Seeking to challenge practices that discriminate against women and other vulnerable individuals and groups does not mean working only with women or members of such groups – including those amongst them who do not believe in change. It is essential to also understand masculine opinions and to work with men – for gender equality will be difficult to achieve against the resistance (passive or active) of men. Since masculine and feminine perspectives are often different, ensuring that both are taken into account generally results in a more holistic overall understanding and thus better, more balanced decision-making.

In some situations, albeit not so common, men or boys may be at a disadvantage compared to women and girls. Examples include low motivation and poor school performance of boys compared to girls in some countries, and in others, cultural expectations of risk-taking in young men that result in higher male mortality from accidents. Being gender sensitive requires an understanding of societal expectations of masculinity and femininity, and of finding appropriate ways of negotiating greater gender equality within the local context.

- We support men and women who challenge narrow gender stereotypes in a positive way, recognising that both men and women have an important role in caring for others (so-called reproductive activities), production (especially participation in the labour market), community activities, and political representation.
- We aim especially to promote positive images of women and men from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds who have successfully challenged discrimination, exercise their rights, and who can inspire others to change their lives for the better.
- We work with male and female opinion leaders who are open to greater social equity and are willing to publically support such a stance, challenging existing power relations, including gender-based violence.

> 5. Our partnerships are based on shared values

Given that we generally work through cooperation partners in our project implementation, they play a crucial role in our efforts to promote gender equality and social equity. Whilst the nature of our collaboration with cooperation partners varies according to the context and task, experience shows that it is important to build relationships that go beyond simple contractual agreements, being based on trust and shared values. We

- include GSE responsiveness as an important criterion in the selection of our partners wherever possible.

- analyse partner performance with regard to GSE, provide appropriate training and accompaniment to those in need of it, and if necessary, decide against contract renewal if no progress is made.

With regard to funding partners, opportunities for specific leverage may be more limited, but when considering new funding partnerships, we

- assess the degree to which the values of the potential partner are compatible with our own
- avoid partnerships with organisations that openly disregard gender and social equity principles.

Some funding partners (eg. SDC) have their own clear guidelines on gender and social inclusion⁸. We respect these guidelines, and if possible seek to “go a step further” in our own practice.

> 6. We seek to highlight gender equality and social equity in policy debates

As an international organisation rooted in Switzerland, we are aware of potential sensitivities when intervening in national policy issues related to gender equality and social equity in our partner countries. We therefore

- work particularly through our partners, supporting them in their advocacy campaigns;
- offer our services directly as appropriate, for example in convening multi-stakeholder platforms and collating relevant information into a readily accessible form (briefing paper, video, etc).
- tailor our policy level activities according to the country circumstances, with specific project or programme-wide actions where “windows of opportunity” arise.

In Switzerland, we are active in direct publicity, advocacy campaigns and political debates around gender equality and social equity in the context of development cooperation.

> 7. We uphold gender equality and diversity in our internal organisation

It is important that we “practice what we preach”.

- We monitor our own workforce diversity and endeavour to make it as gender-balanced as possible. We are committed to achieving a minimum 40% women or men in middle and senior management, as well as in our Board of Directors.
- Our human resource regulations are responsive to

gender equality and social equity.

- We expect all our male and female staff to uphold GSE principles, and we take this into account in recruitment, annual performance reviews and promotion.
- Where necessary, we are pro-active in recruiting women or men, seeking to do this in a way that challenges gender stereotypes, and offering training as appropriate. At country level, we aim for a workforce that is representative of social diversity in our programme area.

> 8. In monitoring and evaluating our efforts, we seek to learn and improve

We seek foremost to learn from our own experiences in promoting gender equality and social equity.

- We establish sex disaggregated baseline data in all our projects, and work towards full data disaggregation on the basis of social status as well as sex. We devise indicators at project and programme level that specifically target women, poor and disadvantaged individuals when referring to the intended beneficiaries or primary stakeholders. These are regularly monitored to guide further interventions.
- We aim to ensure that the allocation of financial resources is consistent with our GSE principles. To analyse performance and draw out lessons learned with regard to progress on GSE aspects in our programmes, we also conduct periodical evaluations at project, country and global level.

At the same time, we also seek to share and learn from the experience of others.

- We document our experiences at country programme and organisational level in a systematic manner
- We participate in networks for knowledge sharing at country and organisational level
- We integrate what we learn from others with regard to GSE in our activities, striving to progress and innovate.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Indeed, many people living in poverty perceive their social exclusion to be the worst part of their situation. See www.poverty-wellbeing.net/en/Home/Focus_on_Poverty/Views_of_the_Poor or Briefing Paper 2 www.poverty-wellbeing.net/en/Home/Focus_on_Poverty/The_Poverty_File
- ² See for example www.equalitytrust.org.uk/
- ³ World Bank (2011) Gender Equality and Development World Development Report 2012 World Bank, Washington DC, USA.; Global Gender Gap Report 2012 www.weforum.org/issues/global-gender-gap
- ⁴ Most notably, the 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) which has been ratified by most countries of the world www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw
- ⁵ With the exception is girls' primary school enrolment, where progress is broadly on track in many although not all countries, the MDGs that specifically seek to address women's needs (goals 3 and 5) are amongst those least likely to be met see: www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/%282011E%29_MDRReport2011_ProgressChart.pdf
- ⁶ www.cso-effectiveness.org/-8-istanbul-development067.html
- ⁷ This definition is essentially that used by SDC. Another definition, formulated by Joan Scott (1986), is that "Gender is the perceived differences between the sexes; and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power" Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis Joan W. Scott The American Historical Review Vol. 91, No. 5 (Dec., 1986), pp. 1053–1075
- ⁸ See www.sdc-gender-development.net and www.sdc-decentralization.net/en/Home/Practical_Learning/Learning_Projects/Social_Inclusion