



Gender Equality & Social Inclusion (GESI) Guidelines

For BCFs Experts and Reviewers

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Who should use these guidelines?

These guidelines have been developed to provide members of the three Biodiversity Challenge Funds (BCFs) Expert Groups (Darwin Expert Committee, IWT Advisory Group and Darwin Plus Advisory Group) and External Reviewers with guidance on considerations in terms of Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) when reviewing applications and project reports.

The document:

- Outlines the key requirements that applicants and projects are required to meet in terms of their approach and integration of GESI within their work;
- Outlines key considerations regarding unconscious bias;
- Provides guidelines on how reviewers should consider GESI when reviewing applications and project reports;
- Provides anonymised case examples from the BCFs portfolio.

Gender Equality & Social Inclusion in the BCFs

The BCFs commits to be a GESI sensitive programme.

A GESI sensitive approach is understood to demonstrate programming **will “do no harm”, not exacerbate inequality** and **ensure meaningful and context appropriate engagement and participation** of those involved in the project regardless of gender, disability, and other marginalised groups.

While it is acknowledged there may be nuances in how projects deliver on a GESI sensitive approach through the various schemes, **all successful projects must be able to demonstrate** that they:

- Understand the GESI context in which the project is working within and ensure activities and interventions take contextual factors into account in the design and implementation of the project.
- Ensure early and continuous inclusive and meaningful participation of all those engaging with the project.
- Will not contribute to or create any further inequalities¹.

The above are essential to projects achieving GESI sensitive standard, however projects are encouraged to push beyond these to deepen and improve their GESI contribution. For further information please see the *GESI Ambition Statement* and further resources under the 'Resources' tab on the fund websites.

¹ As no action is neutral, by not giving due consideration to GESI, projects could unintentionally exacerbate inequalities, reinforce barriers or cause harm to already disadvantaged groups.

Please see the below guidance on things to consider when reviewing application forms and project reporting to ensure a fair, objective and standardised approach is taken to scoring applications and assessing contributions to GESI across reviewers.

Being Mindful of Unconscious Bias

Gender Equality and Social Inclusion is fundamentally concerned with recognising and addressing inequalities, exclusion and unequal power dynamics. To assess this fairly, reviewers must also recognise that their own assumptions and experiences may influence how they interpret evidence and judge project approaches. Unconscious bias can affect perceptions of applicant organisations, technical methodologies, stakeholder engagement approaches and project quality. Being aware of these biases supports more objective assessments and helps ensure that projects are judged on the strength of their evidence, context and proposed outcomes rather than familiarity with particular approaches or styles of presentation.

When reviewing applications, please consider the following:

Potential Bias	What to Consider
Conflict of Interest (COI) Bias	Be aware that perceptions of applicants, organisations, or individuals may be influenced by existing professional relationships, prior collaborations, or declared conflicts of interest. Reviewers should ensure that any conflicts are declared, as outlined in the COI policy.
Confirmation Bias	Reviewers may have established views on which conservation, development, or capacity-building approaches are most effective. While experience is valuable, reviewers should assess the suitability of the proposed approach for the specific context rather than favouring or penalising particular methodologies based on personal preferences. Consider whether evidence has been provided to justify the proposed approach and avoid consistently scoring certain approaches lower because they differ from your own experience or expectations.
Framing Bias	Applications may vary in quality of presentation, writing style, or use of language. Reviewers should focus on the substance, feasibility, and evidence behind the proposed work rather than being unduly influenced by how professionally or persuasively information is presented. A well-written application should not receive a higher score solely because it is presented more clearly, nor should applicants be disadvantaged where language or writing style is not their primary strength.
Similarity Bias	Reviewers may be inclined to favour applicants, organisations, or projects that reflect their own background, experiences, values, areas of expertise, or preferred ways of working. Assessments should focus on the quality, relevance, and potential of the proposal rather than its similarity to the reviewer's own experiences. Consider whether your judgement is based on

	the evidence presented and avoid rewarding proposals simply because they align closely with your personal interests, professional background, or viewpoints.
Anchoring Bias	Reviewers may be unduly influenced by initial information, first impressions, or early scores when assessing an application. This can occur when an initial strength or weakness disproportionately shapes subsequent judgements, even when additional evidence is available. Reviewers should consider all assessment criteria and the full content of the application before reaching a conclusion. Avoid allowing early impressions or previous scores to overshadow later information that may provide a more balanced view of the proposal's merits.

Good practice for reviewers

- Assess applications against the published criteria and evidence provided.
- Review your own scoring to ensure that it remains consistency between applications.
- Challenge your initial assumptions and consider whether they are evidence-based.
- Reflect on patterns in your scoring to ensure you are not systematically favouring or penalising particular organisations, approaches, or styles of presentation.
- Provide objective, evidence-based comments to support scores awarded.

This approach helps ensure a fair, transparent, and consistent review process for all applicants.

Guidance for Reviewing Applications

Please see the below guidance on things to consider when reviewing application forms to ensure a standard approach is taken to scoring contributions to GESI across reviewers. The guidance below expands on the assessment criteria outlined in the fund specific guidance and should be used in conjunction.

Overall, the key question reviewers should be considering here is whether the applicant has undertaken a credible GESI Analysis and used it to inform project design.

	Applications
Completion of GESI Analysis	Ensure the applicant has undertaken a proportionate GESI Analysis appropriate to the scale, complexity and context of the project. This should include reference to all six GESI Analysis principles:

	<p>Rights: Legal and customary.</p> <p>Practice: Attitudes, customs, and beliefs.</p> <p>Environment: stressors and vulnerability.</p> <p>Roles and Responsibilities: Division of time, space, and labour.</p> <p>Representation: Participation, inclusion, and power.</p> <p>Resources: Access and control of assets and services.</p> <p>Consider whether the GESI Analysis goes beyond describing demographics and demonstrates why particular groups may face different opportunities, constraints, needs or risks. The analysis should be comprehensive and evidenced.</p> <p>Consider whether the application identifies the different groups who may be affected by, participate in, or benefit from the project, including women, Indigenous Peoples, and other marginalised groups where relevant.</p> <p>Assess whether the applicant demonstrates an understanding of the barriers, inequalities, risks and power dynamics that may influence participation and benefit-sharing within the project context.</p>
<p>Integrating findings from GESI Analysis</p>	<p>Review whether evidence from the GESI Analysis has informed project design, activities, stakeholder engagement approaches, targets and expected outcomes. There should be a clear link between the analysis and the proposed interventions.</p> <p>Assess whether the proposed monitoring and evaluation approach will enable the project to understand who is benefiting from the project and whether benefits are being distributed equitably.</p> <p>N.B. all indicators that relate to people should be disaggregated by sex and indigenous status.</p> <p>Where barriers, exclusion risks, or risks of deepening inequality have been identified, assess whether appropriate and realistic mitigation measures have been proposed.</p> <p>Ensure comments on GESI are not isolated to project staff members but also consider project participants and stakeholders.</p> <p>N.B. if a project is working in an uninhabited area (most relevant for Darwin Plus projects) the project should focus on those working on the project within their GESI Analysis.</p>

Consider whether the applicant has considered meaningful participation² in project design and decision-making, rather than consultation alone.

At application stage, a strong GESI Analysis should:

- Identify who may benefit from or be negatively affected by the project.
- Analyse the barriers, inequalities and power dynamics that influence participation and access to benefits.
- Consider context-specific risks and opportunities.
- Demonstrate meaningful engagement with stakeholders during project design.
- Clearly explain how findings from the analysis have informed project activities and implementation approaches.
- Include realistic measures to reduce exclusion and avoid unintended harm.
- Demonstrate how progress and benefits will be monitored across different groups.

² Meaningful participation is defined in the [Law Insider Dictionary](#) as “engaging a diverse group of stakeholders who are representative of the communities that policies and programs will impact, not only in consultative roles to provide input, but also to co-plan or lead program development efforts, have access to data and resources to make informal decisions”.

Guidance for Reviewing Project Reports:

The following guidance should be used by reviewers when assessing projects' Annual and Final Reports.

Overall, the key question to consider here is whether the project has implemented, monitored and adapted its work based on its GESI Analysis, and can it demonstrate evidence of more inclusive delivery and outcomes?

	Project Reporting
Review of GESI Analysis	Assess whether the project continues to demonstrate an understanding of the GESI context and whether any changes in the operating environment have affected participation, inclusion, risks or opportunities.
	Consider whether findings from the project's GESI Analysis have informed implementation decisions, adaptations to activities, stakeholder engagement approaches and project management processes.
	Assess whether project activities have enabled meaningful participation and influence in decision-making, rather than engagement limited to attendance or consultation.
MEL	Review whether the project is reporting on participation, benefits and outcomes for different groups, rather than reporting only on overall participation numbers.
	Assess whether the project is generating evidence on who is benefiting from project activities and whether the project is promoting/ achieving equity amongst its beneficiaries.
	Where relevant, assess whether reported results demonstrate progress towards reducing barriers or improving equitable access to project opportunities, resources or benefits.
Risk	Consider whether barriers identified during project design have materialised in practice and whether appropriate mitigation measures have been implemented.
	Review whether the project has identified any unintended positive or negative impacts on women, people with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples and other marginalised groups, and whether these have been addressed appropriately.
Lessons Learned	Consider whether project learning has improved the project's understanding of local power dynamics, inequalities or inclusion challenges, and how this learning has informed implementation.

Consider whether the project has reflected on lessons learned from within the project, and whether these lessons will inform future project delivery and sustainability.

At reporting, a strong GESI Analysis should:

- Demonstrate how findings from the GESI Analysis have informed implementation decisions.
- Provide evidence of meaningful participation by affected stakeholders.
- Explain challenges, barriers and unintended impacts encountered during delivery.
- Show how the project has adapted in response to GESI-related learning.
- Present disaggregated data alongside analysis of what the data means.
- Demonstrate who is benefiting from the project and whether benefits are being distributed equitably.
- Reflect honestly on lessons learned and remaining challenges.
- Provide evidence that the project has contributed to more inclusive and equitable conservation outcomes where relevant.

Project Examples:

The following section provides anonymised examples from the BCFs portfolio of approaches to integrating GESI within a project. These examples are considered to demonstrate strong approaches to GESI at both the application or reporting stage. These should be considered by reviewers as the types of GESI approaches that meet the GESI sensitive minimum requirement.

Strong examples of GESI consideration:

Example	Description
A	In their pre-project scoping, project A found that female-headed households were particularly vulnerable to issues the project aimed to address, due to gender gaps in literacy, access to education, and job opportunities. The project's inception focus groups and questionnaires were designed to be contextually proportionate and representative of gender, with disaggregated results, which led to evidence-informed project design and to ensure women's voices were being heard and were engaged with addressing the issues.
B	Project B realised that women had low representation in the fisheries supply chain in the island communities the project was working in, but were present within government agencies. The project used inclusive communications and stakeholder strategies to promote gender sensitivity, as well as including fishers' families (wives, girlfriends and children) in project activities.
C	Project C leveraged women's existing expertise and skills in collecting mushrooms, herbs and tubers to apply those methodological and diligent searching qualities to snare removal. The project further promoted female role models, including project team members and staff drawn from ethnic minorities, to promote the recruitment of women into typically male-dominated roles.