



Executive Summary

Building Inclusive Clean Cooking Markets

Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in the
‘Strengthening the Entrepreneurial
Ecosystem for Clean Cooking’ Programme

SEE - Clean Cooking

Co-financed by:



Ministry of Foreign Affairs



MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS
OF DENMARK
Danida

Coordinated by:



Netherlands Enterprise Agency

In partnership with:



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The publication is part of a series on gender and social inclusion in clean cooking developed by ENERGIA for the *Strengthening the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem for Clean Cooking* (SEE Clean Cooking) programme. The programme promotes affordable, sustainable and modern cooking solutions through a holistic, private-sector market development approach in eight countries across Africa and Asia. The programme focuses on clean cooking solutions such as biodigesters and higher-tier cookstoves.

The Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO) coordinates the programme, co-financed by the European Commission, the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Danish International Development Agency. ENERGIA supports the integration of gender and social inclusion across all programme activities.

August 2026

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1. Introduction

The Strengthening the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem for Clean Cooking (SEE Clean Cooking) programme (2022–2026) supports the development of sustainable markets for biodigesters and higher-tier clean cooking (HTCC) solutions across Africa and Asia. Recognising that gender inequalities and social exclusion constrain both market development and equitable outcomes, the programme integrates Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) across its core pillars: business development support (BDS), access to finance, and enabling environment strengthening.

ENERGIA, as the Implementer for Gender Mainstreaming (IGM), worked with the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO) and the country and thematic implementers to embed GESI across programme design and delivery. This brief summarises the programme's approach, key results, and lessons for advancing inclusive clean cooking markets.

2. Why GESI Matters for Clean Cooking Markets

Women are central to clean cooking markets as primary users, decision-makers, and entrepreneurs. Their participation is critical to adoption, sustained use, and market growth. However, across programme countries, women and other socially excluded groups such as youth, persons with disabilities, and persons in remote areas face persistent barriers that limit their participation in clean cooking markets as entrepreneurs, employees, and consumers. For the SEE Clean Cooking programme countries GESI barriers identified include:

- **Limited access to finance:** Women and excluded groups often lack collateral, credit history, and access to larger-scale financing, which in turn restrict business growth.
- **Skills and information gaps:** Women have less access to technical training, business development services, and market information.
- **Social norms and mobility constraints:** Gendered roles, care responsibilities, and safety concerns limit women's ability to engage in entrepreneurship and employment including the networking to facilitate these.
- **Underrepresentation in decision-making:** Women often do not participate in sector associations, leadership roles, and policy processes due to skills gaps and limited networking opportunities.
- **Weak enabling environment for GESI:** Policies, standards, and institutional structures often lack explicit gender-responsive provisions and coordination.

These barriers highlight that achieving both scale and inclusion in clean cooking markets requires deliberate integration of GESI into their development.

3. Programme Approach to GESI Mainstreaming

The programme adopted a structured approach to operationalising GESI across partners and activities.

3.1 Institutionalising GESI

The Implementer Gender Mainstreaming, ENERGIA, supported LIs to embed GESI within their organisations through:

- Supporting LIs to appoint GESI focal points and teams
- Conducting project team capacity needs assessments and targeted training
- Supporting LIs to develop Gender Action Plans (GAPs) which they then validated
- Introduction of tools such as the Gender Mainstreaming Progress Checker to assess progress
- On-going follow-up support and technical backstopping to LIs

This created accountability structures and strengthened ownership of GESI within LIs.

3.2 Generating Evidence through GESI Analyses

GESI analyses were conducted across programme contexts to identify GESI gaps in value chains (entrepreneurship, workforce participation, decision-making), assess context specific barriers to accessing finance and programme support, and GESI gaps in the enabling environment. These analyses informed programme design adjustments and prioritisation of interventions.

3.3 Integrating GESI into Programme Design through GESI Action Plans

Based on the evidence from GESI analyses, LIs developed GESI action plans (GAPs) with technical support from ENERGIA through a combination of virtual engagement and in-person training. The process involved translating analytical findings into practical, context-specific interventions across the programme's core pillars. The GAPs detailed the specific GESI gaps to be addressed, defined GESI objectives, and outlined targeted activities, indicators, responsibilities, timelines, and resources required for implementation. GAP validation processes ensured that plans were feasible, aligned with programme objectives, and endorsed by key project personnel, strengthening accountability for implementation.

While GAPs demonstrated strong intent and provided a clear operational framework for mainstreaming GESI, their implementation was constrained by limited and non-ring-fenced resources. Nevertheless, they played a critical role in translating GESI commitments into concrete actions within the programme.

3.4 Facilitating learning and knowledge generation

Throughout the programme, ENERGIA and implementing partners proactively generated and curated lessons from the past as well as from emerging lessons. These were curated in knowledge products including two lessons learned reports, three thematic briefs and, in Cambodia, two national focused learning products^{1,2}. The first lessons report was based on clean cooking lessons from past programmes across the globe and aimed at informing the SEE-Clean Cooking programme as it evolved³. The second was focused on learning from experienced in implementing gender responsive e-cooking in Nepal and Cambodia⁴ given that e-cooking is a relatively new and emerging subsector. And having identified gaps in research on GESI in bioslurry market development and in GESI and energy in the Sahelian contexts,

¹ SNV (2025) Beyond numbers: gender outcomes of RBF in clean cooking. SNV Learning brief. September 2025

² SNV (2023) Innovators expanding clean cooking access in Cambodia's remote communities, SNV

³ ENERGIA (2024) [Gender Equality and Social Inclusion: Lessons and Good Practices from Clean Cooking Programmes](#)

⁴ ENERGIA (2026) [Why a gendered approach to supporting the use and trading of bioslurry and bioslurry-enriched compost is needed in Africa](#)

two thematic briefs were developed on these⁵. A final lessons learned report draws from the specific experience of the programme, highlighting how GESI was integrated in the SEE-Clean Cooking Programme and its results⁶.

4. Key Results and Emerging Outcomes

Across its core pillars, the programme integrated GESI to strengthen both inclusion and market outcomes.

Under business development support, the programme worked with the Energy Enterprise Coach (EEC) to ensure that women-led businesses and businesses led and owned by excluded groups were eligible for business development support (BDS). Energy SMEs were trained to understand the impacts of GESI on business operations and integrate GESI in these, and BDS support was provided with consideration of the needs of businesses owned and/or led by women and excluded groups. This contributed to increased participation of women in BDS support as well as women being employed in the clean cooking enterprises supported by the programme especially in last-mile distribution and retail. Examples include a 33% of women in the workforce among Kenyan biodigester enterprises while in Ethiopia, it resulted in women accounting for 44% of jobs created in e-cooking enterprises⁷.

In access to finance, the programme introduced more GESI-responsive Results-Based Financing (RBF) and Innovation Challenge Fund (ICF) mechanisms. This included targeted outreach to women-led enterprises, simplified application processes and providing hands-on support to help applicants understand and complete requirements. Information was also made available in using local languages, and through both digital and community-based channels to ensure women and underserved businesses were aware of opportunities. Eligibility and scoring criteria were weighted to recognise the realities of women-led enterprises, including lower initial sales volumes and different business models. In some cases, incentives were included to motivate SMEs to reach underserved markets and the poor. Together, these measures reduced entry barriers, increased participation of women-led enterprises in RBF and ICF mechanisms, and improved access to financing for businesses that would otherwise have been excluded. For example, in Cambodia and Ethiopia up to 66% and 70% of supported enterprises respectively, were women-led. At least one women-led in Ethiopia and Uganda were funded to develop their innovation and bring them to market⁸.

To expand inclusive market reach, the programme supported demand-side interventions such as community demonstrations, targeted marketing campaigns, and peer learning. The use of women sales agents and community networks improved engagement with female consumers and built trust in clean cooking solutions. In Ethiopia, this contributed to 44% of electric cooking appliances being sold to female-headed households⁹.

Finally, the programme strengthened the enabling environment by engaging in policy processes including in ministerial technical working groups, clean cooking roadmaps, subnational energy planning, and clean cooking strategies in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda and the Sahel; supporting coordination among stakeholders and building partnerships with networks and institutions that address the inclusion of women, persons with disabilities, and refugees. In Kenya, the programme undertook a GESI awareness training for seven counties¹⁰. Sector associations were also trained on GESI mainstreaming in their governance and among their members' SMEs. These efforts contributed to the integration of GESI provisions in sector strategies and increased participation of women and other underrepresented groups in sector governance and decision-making platforms. In Uganda for example, the implementer advocated and supported the inclusion of women in national clean cooking taxation

⁵ ENERGIA (2026) [Gender and Social Inclusion in the Sahel: Implications for Biodigester Market Development](#)

⁶ ENERGIA (2026) Advancing Inclusive Energy Markets: Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in the SEE - Clean Cooking Programme

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ In Kenya, energy planning and budget starts at county level making it critical that GESI be integrated from this level.

dialogues. As a result, 41% of the 105 participants in these dialogues were women. In Ethiopia, GESI provisions advocated by the implementer were incorporated into the national Clean Cooking Roadmap.

5. Key Lessons and Reflections

GESI must be embedded from the outset: Weak integration at design stage makes later mainstreaming less effective. Early integration ensures alignment across programme components and resources.

Dedicated resources are critical: While many LIs demonstrated strong commitment, limited budgets constrained the scale and depth of GESI interventions and hence transformative change. Ring-fencing resources are also important to ensure transformative interventions are implemented.

Capacity building and support is continuous, not one-off: Training improved awareness, but sustained engagement, provision of relevant tools, and follow-up support were necessary to translate knowledge into practice.

Addressing structural barriers is difficult and requires system-wide engagement: Social norms, policy gaps, and institutional weaknesses are deeply embedded and cannot be addressed through programme-level interventions alone. Long-term, multi-stakeholder engagement is essential.

Tailored approaches are important: While barriers across countries are similar, there are nuances in their depth and how they manifest. As such, tailored GESI approaches are required, particularly in fragile and complex contexts such as the Sahel¹¹.

6. Conclusion

The SEE Clean Cooking programme demonstrates when GESI is integrated into clean cooking market development and embedded across programme systems rather than treated as an add-on, it can enhance women's participation in clean cooking markets, extend clean cooking to female-headed and poor households, and strengthen market performance. Future programmes can build on these lessons to scale inclusive clean cooking markets that deliver both social and economic impact.

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¹¹ Ibid