## **Investment Concept**

**Investment Concept Title: Support Unit for Gender Equality (SURGE)**

**Start date: 30 January 2022 End date: 30 January 2024 (with an option to extend for three years)**

**Total proposed DFAT funding: *up to*** $2 million **Total proposed funding from all donor/s:** n/a

**Current program fund annual allocation:** $65m **AidWorks investment number: INM617**

**Overall Risk Profile**: *low* **Risk** *low* **Value** *low*

**Proposed design pathway:** Concept to tender

**Concept endorsed by AGB:** *NA*

**Quality Assurance:** Internal review

**Policy Approval: Delegate at Post:** *N/A* **Delegate in Canberra:** Sarah Goulding, AS, GEB

1. **Development Context (What is the problem?)**

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on women and girls. They are overrepresented in sectors hardest hit by COVID-19 disruptions, are doing more unpaid care work, and are at even greater risk of exploitation, violence and abuse[[1]](#footnote-1). The pandemic has raised the risk that hard-won gains on gender equality are reversed. Outlined in *Partnerships for Recovery,* Australia’s response to COVID-19 seeks to address the specific needs of women and girls in our region and ensure they can participate meaningfully in decision-making about response and recovery efforts.

Australia is a trusted partner in the Indo-Pacific region on gender equality and women’s and girls’ empowerment. In 2019-20, an estimated $1.3 billion of our Official Development Assistance contributed to gender equality, the majority of which was through strategic gender mainstreaming approaches in global, regional and bilateral initiatives. Effectively delivering results for gender equality requires high quality implementation of DFAT’s twin-track approach to gender equality, including development of new designs and implementation of programs with strong focus on gender equality. Providing high quality, targeted technical and other assistance to programs across the Department helps with both the delivery of effective programs and accountability under Australia’s international commitments to gender equality.

Given the persistent or widening gender equality gaps and the range of challenging contexts in which DFAT works, effective implementation of DFAT’s gender equality agenda requires access to a range of specialised technical assistance, alongside strategic coordination and thematic oversight by DFAT.

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

Under the Australian Government's *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Strategy* (2016) and the *Foreign Policy White Paper* DFAT has adopted a twin-track approach with targeted gender equality initiatives and mainstreaming gender equality across our foreign policy, trade and economic diplomacy and development investments. Support for those who are hardest hit, particularly women and girls, underpins Australia’s *Partnerships for Recovery* COVID-19 response and recovery strategy, recognising that gender equality is an important contributor to prosperity, stability and security. DFAT’s response seeks to address the specific needs of all women and girls in the Indo-Pacific region, and to include them in decision-making as powerful agents for change and ‘building back better’.

Improving and sustaining gender performance requires program level technical advice across the aid program, coordinated and quality assured by DFAT’s Gender Equality Branch. There is ongoing demand from aid program areas for a broad range of internal and external support to ensure high quality, technically accurate and effective policy and programming across gender equality priority areas as well as various sectors, including climate change, infrastructure, economic governance, education, etc.

Policy and geographical program areas within DFAT, including posts, are largely staffed by generalists, who need access to specialist support. As such, there is a need for ongoing investment in an organised and engaging workforce development program to support capability.

Establishing an external Support Unit for Gender Equality (SURGE) will improve the capacity of DFAT’s Gender Equality Branch to respond efficiently and effectively to a wider range of demand for technical assistance across DFAT, with focus on South East Asia and the Pacific. The Unit will support DFAT gender staff to provide strategic advice that is aligned with domestic and global policy directions, by equipping them with evidence, bespoke tools and information to influence the Department’s forward agenda and oversee policy and programming coherence.

1. **Proposed Outcomes and Investment Options (What?)**

The overarching goal of this investment will be to improve the outcomes of Australia’s development program on gender equality and women’s empowerment through the provision of high quality technical expertise.

The proposed End of Program Outcome of the Support Unit for Gender Equality is that DFAT staff have access to timely, high quality advice and resources to strengthen DFAT’s global, regional and bilateral development portfolio and policy engagement efforts related to gender equality and women’s and girls’ empowerment.

The following are the intermediate objectives of the Support Unit for Gender Equality:

1. To provide the Gender Equality Branch with high quality and responsive technical assistance that supports and improves the quality and effectiveness of DFAT’s portfolio of existing investments and future programming that contributes to gender equality and women’s empowerment
2. To support the Gender Equality Branch with policy coherence and embed best practice on gender equality and women’s empowerment across DFAT, underpinned by evidence
3. To support the Gender Equality Branch in strengthening the capacity of DFAT staff at practitioner and specialist level in promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment (in close collaboration with the Diplomatic Academy).

The Support Unit will deliver the following functions, which will help step up in an efficient manner the delivery of technical assistance, with focus on items 1-3 and, depending on program effectiveness, expanding gradually to cover items 4 and 5:

1. **Sourcing and mobilising gender technical expertise**
* Identification, recruitment and management of pre-qualified consultants, with
	+ a range of sub-specialities
	+ ability to provide both short-term (<6 months) and long-term (>6 months) technical assistance, in Canberra as well as overseas, with the option of specialists visiting or sitting in GEB’s office in Canberra if security clearances allow for this
	+ in-built quality control mechanisms
1. **A help-desk knowledge request service**
* Access directly by all DFAT staff
* Rapid request brief analytical pieces
* Longer-term analytical reviews and synthesis – country-specific and international - drawing on global best practice and lessons learned
1. **Knowledge management /evidence generation and learning uptake**
* Cross-program and cross-sector/thematic analysis (periodic meta-analyses) and support for M&E
* Synthesis of good practice and lessons learnt, including other donor practices, with a view to improving baseline expectations for effectively addressing gender equality in sectors, preserving programmatic learning, and deepening focus on social norms change and transformative interventions
* Topic specific guidance
* Identifying gender equality ‘trailblazer’ units, whose best practice can be highlighted and shared through a Community of Practice; or piloting a ‘peer assist’ learning approach to identify teams working on similar issues and link them up through peer assist workshops
* E-newsletters
1. **Support for professional development for DFAT staff, including GEB staff**
* Training materials in accordance with DFAT’s capabilities framework
* Mentoring support
* Specialist communities of practice
* Tailored seminars or workshops or mini-clinics around any new guidance notes produced, to provide staff with tailored advice and deepen learning and engagement with the content
* Maintain directory of quality assured technical training courses and seminars and e-learning materials – for technical specialists, generalist APS staff and locally recruited staff.
1. **Support for the implementation of the Indo-Pacific Gender Equality Strategy and its objectives, including the Gender Equality Fund**
* Short-term or long-term technical assistance to work within GEB’s office to support program design, management and implementation

After an initial two-year period, a review will inform the next phase, with consideration given to gaps in coverage and delivery and what additional functions the Support Unit might be required to take on. Based on the findings of the review, it will be decided what an extension might cover and for what time period, up to a maximum of three additional years.

GEB’s current agreement for delivery of gender equality training may be absorbed into the Support Unit for Gender Equality. This would mean an additional line of effort around training design and delivery.

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

**Support Unit for Gender Equality (SURGE)**

DFAT considered a range of implementation options to effectively deliver on the outcomes described above. These included the option of DFAT managing a panel of pre-qualified consultants able to provide both short and long-term technical assistance. These options were subsequently ruled out as they did not adequately meet DFAT’s current and projected business needs. Therefore, DFAT’s preferred option is to procure a commercial provider to effectively deliver the core functions identified in Section C through a mix of in-house expertise and identifying, recruiting and managing external consultants with specialised expertise for short- and long-term advice.

The Support Unit for Gender Equality requires a contractor with a good understanding of DFAT’s gender equality agenda and with capability to work closely with DFAT to shape the forward agenda guided by a set of agreed principles.

The limitations of this option include the risk that externally contracted advisors do not understand DFAT priorities and the potential fragmentation across the portfolio, due to the diverse range of advisers contributing expertise. Ensuring that externally sourced specialist input is translated into programming decisions to impact on program quality, will require technical oversight and coordination by the Gender Equality Branch in conjunction with the in-house advisory staff. A Steering Committee with representatives from a range of DFAT program areas will contribute to strategic and technical oversight. DFAT will ensure the Support Unit is well known amongst DFAT gender practitioners, to ensure strategic and effective utilisation of the full suite of available services.

The model will also cater for technical advisory services for DFAT’s non-ODA work, e.g. labour mobility, cyber security, or maritime security. Access to – and strategies to build a network of – a diverse range of consultants, in particular local consultants from/working in target countries, will be a factor in contracting.

**DFAT Support:**

DFAT will put in place a governance model to monitor performance and enable transparent determination of priorities and services of the Support Unit. This will ensure the Support Unit is service-oriented and focused on DFAT’s priority areas. Learning from the recent Specialist Health Services (SHS) evaluation, a separate monthly management meeting will focus on implementation of the strategic settings determined by the governance group. DFAT will put in place processes for monitoring use of outputs and their contribution to impact; regularly assessing and strengthening DFAT capacity to commission support effectively; disseminating products; and cross-Departmental learning.

**Budget:**

The fixed budget to support services provided is up to $1 million annually (total $2 million) over the initial two-year term, with additional budget if the program is extended. This budget includes support costs for recruitment of in-house staff with gender equality expertise (pending security clearances), and the costs of services provided by external consultants.

1. **Risks**

The recommended investment option, as assessed by the Risk and Safeguards Tool is assessed as “low” risk. Key risks to meeting the objectives of the program include:

1. **Poor coordination** between the mechanism and DFAT may limit the Department’s ability to meaningfully influence outcomes. This would possibly lead to products that do not match DFAT’s demand or that may not be suitable for DFAT audiences (e.g. language/jargon, pitch, scope).
2. **Loss of internal expertise/de-skilling of DFAT staff:** Outsourcing of technical advice may lead to de-skilling of DFAT staff in development/program management and thematic/technical knowledge. DFAT staff will need to retain sufficient knowledge and expertise to be able to identify potential problems or opportunities be able to refer tasks to the helpdesk in the first place. Outsourcing of technical advice needs to be carefully balanced with professional development opportunities to maintain DFAT in house development/program management and thematic/technical knowledge.
3. **Limited uptake of support unit services/services do not meet demand**

Due to competing priorities or a lack of awareness of available expertise, DFAT program areas and/or Partner Governments in the region may not take up the offer of specialist advice.

**Annex 1: Provisional Theory of Change for the Support Unit for Gender Equality**

Improvement of the outcomes of Australia’s development program on gender equality and women’s empowerment through the provision of high quality technical expertise

Goal

* Provide the Gender Equality Branch with high quality and responsive technical assistance that supports and improves the quality and effectiveness of DFAT’s portfolio of existing investments and future programming that contributes to gender equality and women’s empowerment
* Support the Gender Equality Branch with policy coherence and embed best practice on gender equality and women’s empowerment across DFAT, underpinned by evidence
* Support the Gender Equality Branch in strengthening the capacity of DFAT staff at practitioner and specialist level in promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment (in close collaboration with the Diplomatic Academy).
1. Sourcing and mobilising gender technical expertise
2. A help-desk knowledge request service
3. Knowledge management /evidence generation and learning uptake
4. Support for professional development for DFAT staff, including GEB staff
5. Support for the implementation of the Indo-Pacific Gender Equality Strategy and its objectives, including the Gender Equality Fund

DFAT staff have access to timely, high quality advice and resources to strengthen DFAT’s global, regional and bilateral development portfolio and policy engagement efforts related to gender equality and women’s empowerment.

End of Program Outcome

Objectives

Activities

1. A Gender-responsive Employment Recovery: Building Back Fairer (ILO Policy Brief July 2020); Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot (UN Women, September 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)