



CROSS-CUTTING THEMES:

A NAVIGATION TOOL

Perhaps you are designing a new project. Or it is annual reporting time. Or you are about to embark on a mid-term evaluation. Did you know that integrating Helvetas' cross-cutting themes can enhance the quality and impact of your work? But what does that even mean? And what does it look like in practice? Read on!

CROSS-CUTTING THEMES AT HELVETAS

In Helvetas’ strategy 2021–2024 there are several cross-cutting themes, as depicted in Figure 1: Gender & Social Equity and Learning & Innovation as transversal themes, Advocacy as an intervention approach (along with Project Implementation and Thematic Advice), and Conflict Sensitivity, Inclusive Systems and Partnerships as institutional approaches. These are all likely to be maintained as cross-cutting themes in the next strategy period. Climate and disaster risks may also be added as an additional cross-cutting theme.

This document introduces a spectrum to help users navigate the integration of these themes into their program or project no matter what stage they are at in the project or programme cycle. The spectrum can aid reflection on the degree of importance to give to each cross-cutting theme and what this means in practice. The importance given to each theme should be based on a context analysis.¹

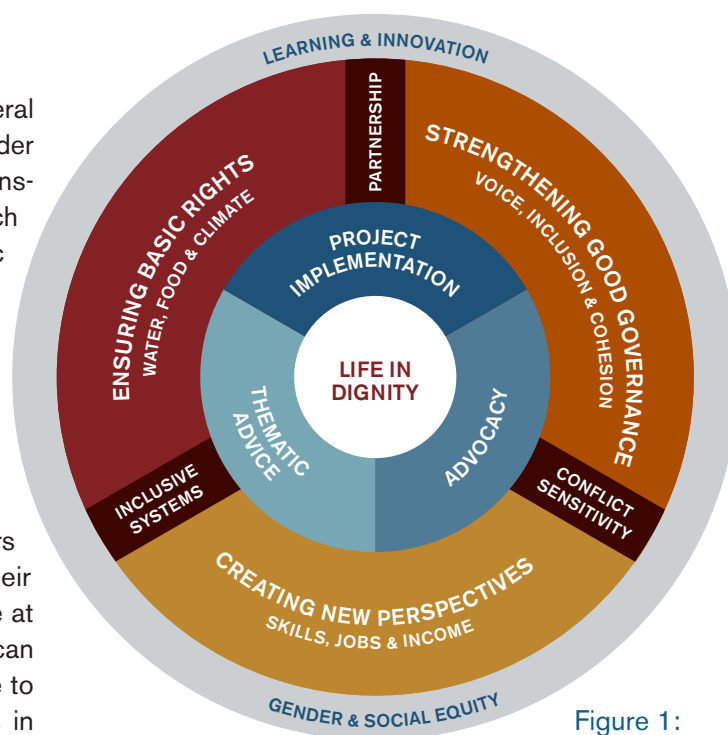


Figure 1: Helvetas at a Glance

THE SPECTRUM: FIVE DEGREES OF INTEGRATION

The spectrum in Figure 2 visualizes the degree to which a cross-cutting theme is integrated into a program or project. It proposes five levels of integration: negative, blind, sensitive, responsive and transformative. The more importance a theme is given, the more an action will be directed towards bringing about change related to this theme.

WHAT HELVETAS AIMS FOR

Helvetas aims for all programs and projects to consider and integrate the cross-cutting themes systematically. Project and programs are not expected to be transformative for every cross-cutting theme. However, no program or project should be theme-negative or theme-blind due to the higher risk of either maintaining, exacerbating, or creating new inequalities, conflicts and injustices. All cross-cutting themes should be treated in a “significant” way, meaning that every project or program is at least in the “sensitive” category.² The more a program or project not only systematically considers a theme, but also aims at systemic change related to the theme, the more the theme becomes a “principal” concern of the program or project. In such cases, a program or project is then “theme-responsive” or even “theme-transformative”.

1 Such a context analysis can be conducted using a tool such as [Political Economy and Power Analysis \(PEPA\)](#).
 2 This note takes inspiration from the Helvetas [GSE strategy](#) drafted by Agnieszka Kroskowska, which in turn draws on the OECD DAC [Gender Policy](#). The [OECD DAC policy markers](#) are a system that classifies overseas development assistance (ODA) measures as “targeted”, “significant” or “principal”, depending on the extent to which they align with OECD development policy objectives.

A TOOL FOR TRACKING DEVELOPMENTS ACROSS THE PROJECT AND PROGRAM CYCLE

Over the lifecycle of a project, through adaptive management, the prioritization of themes may shift as the context changes. For example, a project may start as simply conflict sensitive, seeking to avoid doing harm. However, over time this conflict sensitivity may create entry points for the project to directly work to transform conflict. Transformative projects are therefore more likely achievable with longer, multi-phase project designs. However, it is also possible that on a particular theme a project shifts from being transformative back to sensitive. For example, where a transformational goal related to gender has been achieved a project may choose to re-orient its emphasis, continuing to be gender-sensitive while investing more attention on transforming its partnerships.

This navigation tool can support reflection at an individual, project, program, and institutional level and can be useful at all stages of the project and program cycle. It is recommended to revisit it as part of annual, or mid-term project reviews and planning processes in order to review progress. In the case of more dynamic contexts, a bi-annual review may be considered. It is also encouraged to engage key partners in reflections using this tool. The tables on the following pages elaborate how the spectrum translates to each cross-cutting theme.

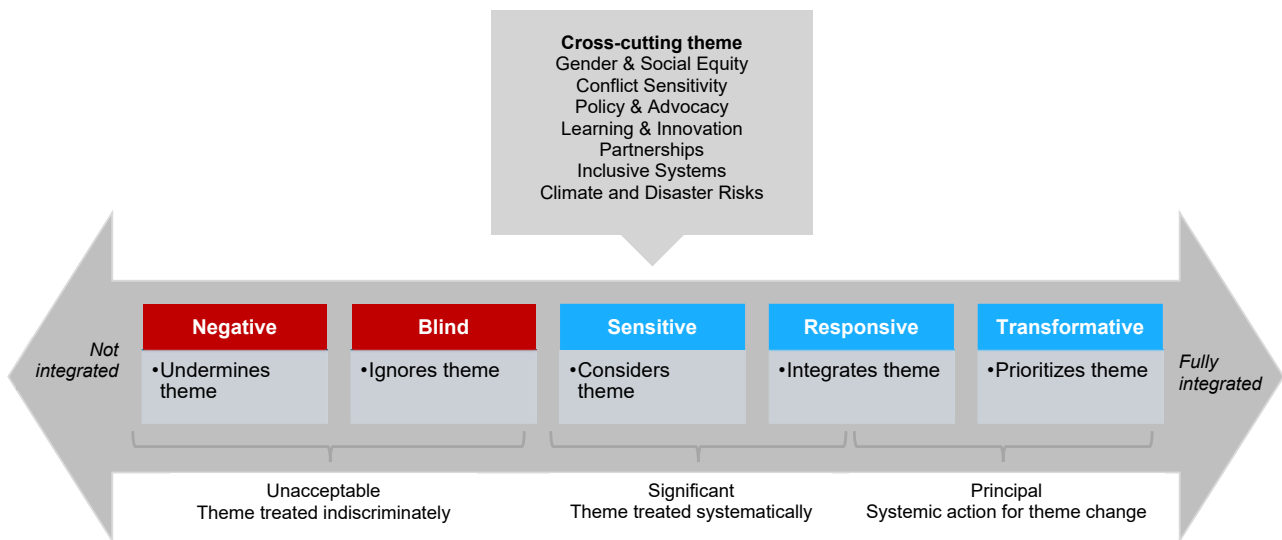


Figure 2: the spectrum of integration for cross-cutting themes



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GENDER & SOCIAL EQUITY

Negative	Blind	Sensitive	Responsive	Transformative
Creates new or exacerbates existing risks, vulnerabilities, and inequalities, negatively impacting women's and/or other primary stakeholder's rights, dignity, safety, living conditions and/or life opportunities.	Does not consider gender and social inclusion or exclusion dynamics in the program/project design and management, and runs the risk of reinforcing inequalities, conflicts, or unchanged status quo.	Considers gender and/or social inequalities, and includes some activities/ outputs with some indicators, targeting women and/or socially marginalized groups by at least 30% of people reached overall.	GSE is integrated into preparatory analyses and systematically responds to some prioritized 'practical needs' which are integrated into the program/project's management cycle. Ultimately, the project meaningfully involves and benefits women and/or socially marginalized groups by at least 50% of people reached overall	Anchors GSE at the center of a Political Economy and Power Analysis . A GSE specific policy change at institutional level is sought; and an inclusive systems development approach is applied, whereby GSE is integrated into procurement , sub-contracting, collaboration, and partnership agreements drawing on GSE principles, with clear red lines, and addressing GSE capacity development gaps and goals.
Examples A migration project which includes women, men, youth applying same approaches for all, without considering the differences in needs and potential vulnerabilities between and within the primary stakeholder groups, putting certain stakeholders at more risk of trafficking, abuse etc.	A Market Systems Development (MSD) project in the Information Communication Technology (ICT) sector with outputs, results, and related outcomes without GSE disaggregated indicators, and in the end the project benefits men predominantly, maintaining status quo in the ICT employment sector.	A project focusing on agribusiness, whereby women and youth were consulted during baselines, and their practical needs mainstreamed across outputs ensuring that by the end of the project at least 30% of primary stakeholders directly reached are women and/or youth,	A Skills, Jobs, Income project where a specific result and related outputs prioritize youth with disabilities' access to continuing education and skills development.	A Voice, Inclusion, Cohesion project aiming at women's political empowerment. Outcomes focus on three interconnected spheres of change: at the level of the women candidates (individual); at the level of stakeholders' attitudes and behaviours (societal change); and at the level of laws, norms and practices which may discriminate against, or protect women candidates, during elections (structural change)

(See the [GSE webpage](#) and [GSE Pamoja Space](#) (internal) for more resources.)

CONFLICT SENSITIVITY

Negative	Blind	Sensitive	Responsive	Transformative
Creates new, or exacerbates existing, conflicts.	Does not consider social tensions and conflict dynamics.	Considers social tensions and conflict dynamics by analysing the conflict context and adapting the intervention to mitigate potential negative effects on the context (3 step-approach).	Based on a conflict analysis, includes specific actions to prevent the outbreak, escalation, continuation or recurrence of conflict by meaningfully addressing sources of tensions and strengthening connecting elements in the society. These are integrated into intervention design, budgeting, implementation and reporting.	Puts conflict at the center of the context analysis. The main objective of the intervention is related to addressing conflict and this is reflected in the theory of change.
Examples Boreholes are constructed for an IDP camp without considering the water needs of local residents, exacerbating tensions between residents and IDPs.	A needs assessment for a new agricultural project focuses only on collecting agriculture-related information and does not collect information on existing or potential conflicts in the target communities.	In a context of inter-ethnic tensions, clear needs-based selection criteria are established and communicated to avoid accusations of discrimination in the selection of beneficiaries.	As part of a youth skills development project in an area affected by violent conflict, specific training modules are included to increase youth resilience to recruitment into armed groups.	Districts are supported to establish local peace committees, which monitor for signs of escalating inter-community tensions and provide a forum for addressing them.

(See the [Conflict Sensitivity webpage](#) and [Conflict Sensitivity Pamoja Space](#) (internal) for more resources.)

POLICY AND ADVOCACY

Negative	Blind	Sensitive	Responsive	Transformative
Does not consider, and has a negative effect on, legal and regulatory frame conditions.	Does not consider legal and regulatory frame conditions.	Considers legal and regulatory frame conditions and integrates into program design and management by conducting a few ad hoc policy events.	Is based on a PEPA analysis and contains a specific advocacy component which is reflected in program design, budgeting, implementation, M&E and reporting.	Is mostly or fully geared towards policy change and puts advocacy at the core of its program design, budgeting, implementation, M&E and reporting.
<p>Examples</p> <p>The project / intervention causes shifts in national budget allocation without considering respective cuts in other sectors key for sustainable development. Or the project goes (without realising) against the vested interests of powerful decision makers in politics and the private sector who in turn take legal measures to jeopardise/stop the project, with negative consequences also for local municipalities and local partner organisations.</p>	<p>The project succeeds in providing drinking water supply to a few municipalities but does not analyse communal tenure rights to land and/or water. In the long run, local stakeholders might lose access to drinking water when decision makers decide to sell land/water use concessions to a private investor.</p>	<p>The project analyses the legal and regulatory framework and has a small policy component, but does not pay much attention to it. Towards the end of the project phase, it publishes one policy brief and presents it at a national round-table meeting with donor and state authorities, but without a proper follow-up strategy.</p>	<p>The project is defined as a local water governance project and works with / supports a national CSO network advocating for legal reforms to the National Water Code with the aim to protect local water use rights.</p>	<p>The project is designed as a full-fledged advocacy intervention focusing on a specific campaign (often based on previous, more 'technical' project phases and in close collaboration with local and national partner organisations).</p>

(See the [Advocacy webpage](#) and [Advocacy Pamoja space](#) (internal) for more resources.)

LEARNING AND INNOVATION

Negative	Blind	Sensitive	Responsive	Transformative
Discourages new ideas, experimentation and activities aimed at learning.	Does not integrate learning processes or consider new ideas and approaches. There is no time to reflect and exchange on results and trends. There is no systematic gathering and analysis of information and data. There is no space for all to provide and discuss new ideas. No attention is given to competences that would contribute to learning/sharing/innovation.	Evaluations and feedback loops periodically happen but with little participation of staff and no participation of partners. Monthly monitoring and yearly reporting are routine. M&E systems deliver data and specific methods (tracer studies, social audits, impact assessments) are applied, but analysis and joint reflection is not happening. New ideas can be shared, but there are seldom resources to develop them further.	Exchange and learning, including with externals, is actively encouraged. Results/evidence-based planning is in place. Monitoring & evaluation occurs, includes a wider team, and occasionally partners, and links to communication. Evaluation methods are mainly participatory, and results are discussed and shared with a wider audience. Emergent innovations are documented and shared within the organization.	Knowledge sharing, learning and innovation competencies of team members and strategic partners are systematically developed. Trends are discussed and actions are identified. Production and sharing of lessons learned is a habit. Innovations are strategically encouraged by processes, time-allocation and budget. Digital and standardized M&E system delivers high quality data which is brokered to different audiences.
Examples Suggestions for project adaptation are ignored or dismissed. Staff are actively discouraged from attending external meetings and webinars. No data on project progress is collected. Staff are sanctioned for reflecting critically.	Moments of collective reflection (within the implementing team, with partners) and follow-up action are not explicitly built into a project/program A project collects data for the sole purpose of reporting to the donor (Annual Report)	A project is externally evaluated, selected project staff are interviewed (provision of information), and the results are shared with project staff at the end (report, summary presentation).	Monitoring and Evaluation information provides one basis for communication products as part of a communication strategy. Project staff and partners are actively encouraged to occasionally share key learning, and to adapt implementation based on it.	Participatory facilitation, innovation and RBM skills training is systematically provided to staff/partners. Regular collective learning exercises are facilitated and feed adaptive management. A project dashboard provides the basis for discussing trends and project steering.

(See the [Learning and Innovation webpage](#) and [LNI Pamoja Space](#) (internal) for more resources.)

PARTNERSHIPS

Negative	Blind	Sensitive	Responsive	Transformative
Works alone in activities and engages in activities that damage the capacities of, and relationships with, potential partners.	Collaboration with other organizations/actors focuses on assistance or service provision. Capacity-building only considers project needs but no long-term thinking about what the organization needs to replicate the activity.	Implements projects through partnerships defined on the basis of complementarities. Helvetas keeps the lead and consults partners for the activities under their responsibility (approach and budget). Capacity-building is included with a focus on the needs/shortcomings of the partner at an institutional level.	Helvetas engages in reciprocal partnerships for projects and program implementation. Partnerships are based on shared values and a common objective. Partners are included in all stages of project cycle management. Capacity development works both ways as the partnership includes a dynamic of mutual learning. Joint advocacy is a core component of the partnership.	Aims at a strategic partnership at country program level. The country program is designed and thought in close collaboration with strategic partners. Activities are planned in mutual articulation. Partnerships are at the centre of the country program with autonomous, self-sufficient partners being one of the desired outcomes. Capacity-building strengthens their ability to work autonomously and include a gradual change of roles between the partners in program implementation.
Examples Helvetas implements activities on its own without consultations/coordination with local authorities on actual priorities and what is already being done by others, including system actors. Worst case scenario, Helvetas replicates activities already conducted by the local actors.	Helvetas gives a municipality funds to contract an engineering company to build a rural road according to the HIMO methodology. This service contract does not include any capacity-building going beyond the project.	In a regional migration project, as project lead, Helvetas conducts a partnership appraisal and agrees on priorities for capacity-building which support both project implementation and the organization's capacities in the longer run. Helvetas remains responsible for final financial management.	Helvetas forms a consortium with a national NGO and they jointly design and implement a project to strengthen the capacity of civil society actors. Both partners learn from the experience. Helvetas strengthens the capacity of the national partner so that it gradually takes over the lead of the project.	A country strategy is defined in close consultation with key strategic partners. The strategy highlights complementarities between the partners a division of work/responsibilities and possibly the lead of partners for some interventions.

(See the [Partnership webpage](#) and [Partnership Pamoja Space](#) (internal) for more resources.)

INCLUSIVE SYSTEMS

Negative	Blind	Sensitive	Responsive	Transformative
<p>Completely excludes or ignores the national legal framework and does not involve system actors. Substitutes the role of system actors, questioning their responsibilities, and destabilising their authority and potentially does harm by creating conflict or exacerbating weakness of the existing system.</p>	<p>Engages in “classic” activities such as infrastructure development and delivering training without involving system actors in the process. May inform system actors and do the minimum to secure legal approvals for implementation. Does not have a strategy that considers the system and takes no measures to strengthen the system.</p>	<p>Considers and partially involves system actors. Aligns with the legal, institutional and regulatory framework conditions, integrating them into program design and implementation. Consults local authorities at key planning and review moments. However, Helvetas keeps the lead on implementation. Equipment and infrastructure are per national standards. Capacity-building focuses on actors’ needs. Advocacy initiatives are used to promote system actors and influence local, regional or national policies.</p>	<p>Focuses on systems strengthening by enabling system actors to fully assume their roles. Based on in-depth analysis of national policies, system actors, and the overall status of how the system functions. Interventions are designed to remove bottlenecks and address gaps. The main system actors lead on project resources allocation decisions. System actors lead processes to strengthen accountability lines between duty bearers and rights holders. Joint advocacy with system actors.</p>	<p>Designed with national governmental actors based on a comprehensive analysis of the system. Focuses on fostering change that leads to the emergence of a new situation where the system actors will have assumed new and/or adapted their existing functions to sustainably improve system functioning compared to the previous status quo. Aims at a profoundly different structure, norm or level of performance that is fully ensured by the system actors without external support.</p>
<p>Examples</p> <p>As part of a humanitarian response an international NGO distributes live-stock medicines directly to pastoralists putting local veterinarians out of business.</p>	<p>A local private company is contracted to construct a new school building. Building permits are obtained. However, no efforts are made to ensure the school will be staffed.</p>	<p>In consultation with local authorities, Helvetas manages the construction of a municipal water system, provides trainings to authorities on system maintenance, and conducts advocacy towards national government to ensure financing is available for system upkeep.</p>	<p>Helvetas supports the competitiveness of the private sector in Peru by supporting public entities in the design and implementation of policies that lead to greater productivity and competitiveness, supporting initiatives to strengthen value chains in four specific sectors, and promoting policy dialogue and knowledge management.</p>	<p>A biodiversity conservation project in Vietnam works with system actors to provide forest-dependent communities with incentives and opportunities to move toward diversified conservation-friendly income streams and to transition professional hunters and loggers out of illegal trade into legal businesses and employment.</p>

(See the [Inclusive Systems webpage](#) and [inclusive systems group Pamoja space](#) (internal) for more details.)

CLIMATE AND DISASTER RISKS

Negative	Blind	Sensitive	Responsive	Transformative
<p>Mal adaptation: increases risks of climate change and disaster impacts by increasing vulnerabilities and/ or exposure. Creates new risks.</p>	<p>Does not consider climate change, climate-related disaster risk or greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the program / project design and management. Runs the risk of maladaptation or, at best, leave status quo unchanged</p>	<p>Addressing the Drivers of Vulnerability: reduces poverty and addresses other capability shortages that make people vulnerable to harm from climate change. Interventions are based on a vulnerability and capacity assessment and help buffer against climate trends or shocks. Building Preparedness and Response Capacities: focuses on building robust systems for problem solving, laying the foundation for more targeted actions.</p>	<p>Managing Climate and Disaster Risk: Climate information and risk assessment is incorporated into decisions to reduce negative effects on resources and livelihoods. Confronting Climate Change: Actions focus almost exclusively on addressing impacts associated with climate change.</p>	<p>Enhances capacities to influence formal or informal rules, plans, policies and legislation to create systemic and lasting changes in skills, capacities, lifestyles, behaviour, governance and decision-making for improved climate and disaster resilience.</p> <p>Has potential for scaling up, replication, knowledge-sharing and learning, contributing to the creation of an enabling environment for climate and disaster resilient development.</p>
<p>Examples</p> <p>Flood walls that do not consider sea level rise or changes in rainfall, creating a false sense of security and triggering more settlements inside that result in massive damage when they breach or over-top.</p>	<p>A land or natural resource based economic development project which does not consider extreme weather events and trends in its risk assessment. May even include the assumption that extreme weather events or changes in the natural environment will not occur during the project's lifetime.</p>	<p>Promoting healthy diets and safe housing that enables people to withstand extremes. Access to early warning systems, other climate services and response mechanisms. Improved planning and natural resource management to enable people to withstand extreme weather and trends.</p>	<p>Disaster response plans, drought-resistant crops, transition to agroecological or regenerative agriculture. Access to risk transfer and insurance mechanisms. Efforts to "climate-proof" physical infrastructure such as drinking water systems. Relocation in response to sea level rise.</p>	<p>Retreat from risk prone regions and planned relocation in lower-risk areas. Changes in the economy in anticipation of climate impacts. Advocacy skills, understanding local budgeting and legislation processes to re-direct investments in actions that promote resilience.</p>

(See the [Climate & Disaster Resilience webpage](#) and [Water, Food, Climate Pamoja page](#) (internal) for more resources.)

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER: A CASE STUDY OF THE NAAFA AND PASSAGE PROJECTS IN BURKINA FASO

PASSAGE and Naafa are two combined vocational projects implemented by Helvetas in Burkina Faso. Through the projects, young Burkinabé aged 15 to 35 – most of whom have not had access to a formal education or employment – initiate projects to meet their basic needs, but also to be inspired and have a source of pride throughout their lives. The young people come from an area in the west of Burkina Faso, between Bobo-Dioulasso (the country’s second largest city) and Banfora. The vocational program’s approach does not simply train young people according to a pre-defined program or match them with available jobs – it goes much further, helping them find a path that makes them feel fulfilled and is responsive to the demands of the market. It also involves families and communities in the process of formulating and carrying out these projects. (See Helvetas [project webpage](#) for full description.)

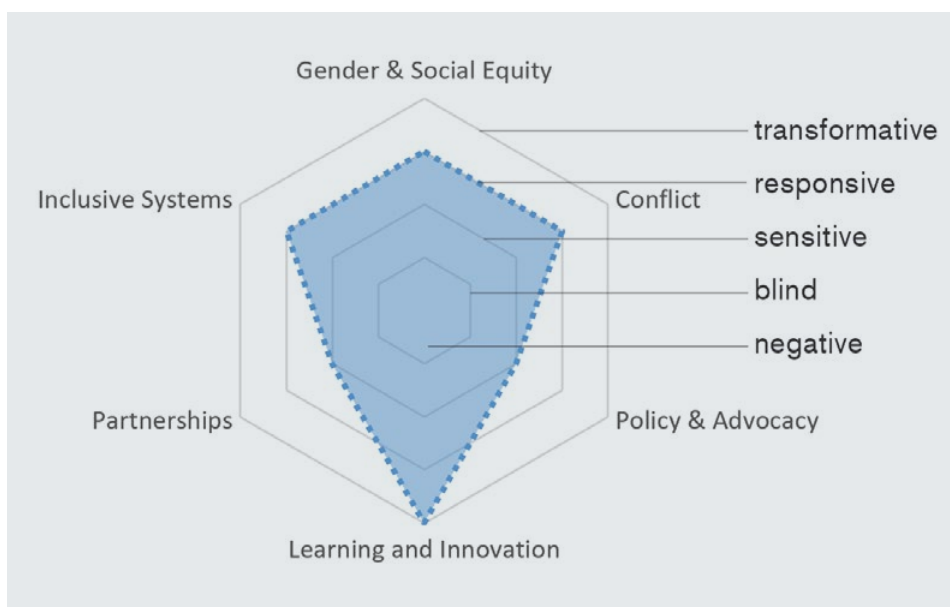
PASSAGE and Naafa began in 2020. An evaluation was conducted at the end of 2022.³ In addition to evaluating the projects against their established objectives, the evaluation also applied the cross-cutting themes navigation tool to consider the extent to which the projects had integrated Helvetas’ cross-cutting themes. Figure 3 uses a radar diagram to visualize the results. The projects are classed as at least “sensitive” to all cross-cutting themes and even “responsive” or “transformative” for some.⁴

Gender and Social Equity: responsive

The projects aimed to ensure the social and economic inclusion of young people, with an explicit emphasis on supporting young women. The projects succeeded in their objective that at least 50% of participants in all areas of the projects should be women. They also paid particular attention to the inclusion of internally displaced people (IDP) and people with a disability. However, the projects could not be considered GSE transformative as no specific GSE policy change was sought.

Conflict: responsive

The team was trained in conflict sensitive project management (CSPM) and had integrated the approach into their activities, including organizing workshops to introduce the approach to the local service providers and training centres involved in the project. The team identified potential risks of doing harm, such as excluding IDPs, and took active measures so that local partners considered how to integrate IDPs into the projects. The projects also developed an interactive communication strategy in order to ensure transparency, accountability and participation throughout the projects, particularly around communication of decisions regarding selection of recipients of training vouchers. Beyond measures to be conflict sensitive, the projects can be considered responsive owing to their success in reinforcing family and community



3 Dacko, R. and Rebord, A. (2023). Rapport d’évaluation: Naafa Phase1 (Janvier 2020-décembre 2023), PASSAGE (Janvier 2020 – décembre 2022). Internal. Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation, 7 January.

4 As climate and disaster risks has not yet been officially designated a cross-cutting theme, they have not been included in this example of the tool’s application.

Figure 3: Degree of integration of cross-cutting themes in Passage and Naafa projects

cohesion. Young people were supported to articulate what they wanted to do with their lives and their visions were discussed and validated within their families and the wider community, thus strengthening the social integration of these young people in their communities. The projects were not considered conflict transformative as addressing sources of conflict was not one of their key objectives.

Policy and Advocacy: sensitive

Young people were trained in advocacy techniques and engaged in advocacy at local level. However, as this was the first phase of the project, and Covid-19 created operational challenges, only a few advocacy-related meetings and gatherings could take place, and there have been only limited results. Although policy and advocacy are at the heart of the second objective of the projects, suggesting the projects should be situated as “responsive” on the advocacy spectrum, the limited results on this second objective make it more accurate to rate the project as policy and advocacy “sensitive” for now. However, it can be expected that the project becomes advocacy “responsive” in the next phase as young people are supported to take local-level concerns up to national level.

Learning and Innovation: transformative

Project implementation was regularly monitored and outcomes evaluated in a participatory manner that included regular exchanges with project partners and stakeholders. Three important good practices were identified: “life projects”, the use of training vouchers, and the use of local service providers to coach and accompany the project participants. These were widely shared with other organizations and donors in Burkina Faso. The digitalization of the monitoring process allowed for remote monitoring that favours future scaling up or adaptation to a changing security context. It also encouraged local ownership by favouring innovation and learning by local partners.

PARTNERSHIPS: SENSITIVE

The projects were led and designed by Helvetas, with a significant focus on building up the capacity of partners to carry the project themselves in the long term. The projects were very successful in involving communal, religious, and customary authorities and Village Development Committees (VDCs), and in building a strong partnership with the National Youth Council, to ensure ownership of the approaches. It can be expected that in future phases the projects move to the responsive area of the partnership spectrum as increased ownership by partners means establishment of a joint vision and involvement of partners at all stages of the project cycle, including objective setting and budgeting and consolidation of the successes in building advocacy partnerships with the regional directorates of youth in Bobo-Dioulasso and Banfora and the administrations of the 6 village councils around the interests of young people.

Inclusive Systems: responsive

The projects implemented the Market Systems Development approach, focused on enabling systems actors to fully assume their roles. Applying adaptive management at each stage of implementation, the main constraints were identified, discussed and reformulated in order to adjust the actions. The projects worked through networks of local service providers (LSPs) with close links the local communities of the targeted young people, supporting them to develop sustainable business models well adapted to the needs and demands of the market.



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