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Muongano Gender Forum – Interim Review

Recommendations for project plan 2026-29

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1. Introduction

Muungano Gender Forum (MGF, Muungano meaning ‘together’) is a project implemented by the International Solidarity Foundation (ISF) in Kisii and Nyamira in Kenya since 2017. In its early years, the project focused on conducting dialogues on gender mainstreaming with county officials. From 2021, responding to feedback, grassroots forums were introduced to echo the needs and priorities voiced by women whose concerns were not being heard at the county level. These forums have since brought communities together to discuss gender equality, with a particular focus on preventing violence against women and girls (VAWG). At the same time, they have supported women’s livelihoods and economic entrepreneurship through the establishment of Soko Fresh markets. These markets regularly bring together both women and men across the agricultural value chain, from producers to value addition, creating spaces to sell their products in Kisii and Nyamira Counties.

Over the years, the MGF project has evolved and adapted to the needs of the community in the Gusii region (Nyamira and Kisii counties). In 2024 and 2025, with a new project manager in place and changes in the county context — notably, the adoption of the national gender policy into county-level gender mainstreaming policy in Kisii and child protection policy in Nyamira — the project has begun redefining its purpose for the upcoming ISF programme period (2026–2029).

This interim review, conducted by ISF’s senior advisers on gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and sustainable livelihoods, Suvi Lensu and Jenna Kettunen respectively, provides an overview of the current status of the project and reflects on the actual and emerging needs of local government actors, institutions, and civil society, and explores possible ways for MGF to work effectively in the upcoming programme — which also aims to phase out MGF as a platform funded solely by ISF in Kisii.

The study began with internal discussions among ISF staff, notably the advisers, ISF programme manager, MGF project manager, and the Kenya country programme director, followed by senior advisers conducting qualitative focus group and key informant interviews in Kisii and Nyamira in April and May 2025. The interviews included county officials from both Kisii and Nyamira, representatives from Kisii University and student organisations, religious leaders, local civil society organisations (CSOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs), MGF steering committee members, as well as other ISF partner organisations and grantees of the ISF Financial Support for Third Parties (FSTP) project, along with community representatives from both counties.

Because MGF is funded and led by ISF, it cannot replace the role of a local CSO. However, it can support and assist CSOs by offering a platform for civil society to actively engage in issues concerning women’s and girls’ rights, thereby hopefully contributing to greater gender equality in the region. Therefore, the purpose of the review was to map the challenges related to women’s equality in the Gusii region and to examine the roles of various actors in addressing these challenges. It also aimed to gather perspectives on the current role and activities of the MGF project and to reflect on MGF’s focus on promoting women’s rights in the region. As MGF is a project with a focus on women’s rights and civil society—not a permanent institution—it is important to define clear goals for the next four years that support the strengthening of local CSOs and gradually transfer coordination responsibilities to them to ensure continuity and sustainability. At the same

time, since MGF is one instrument within ISF's broader programme, the review also includes recommendations for improving MGF's own community outreach and internal project activities that contribute to the ISF established outcomes.

Based on this the report is divided as follows. **First**, it presents interview-based recommendations on the role MGF is envisioned to play in its external relations with local actors and institutions. Interviewees identified several key challenges related to women's rights and participation—both in communities and the workplace—including a lack of coordination and cooperation among stakeholders, limited capacity and data (particularly on VAWG and informal businesses and employment), weak understanding of policy processes and community involvement in implementation, and the isolation of local CSOs from national-level activities and processes. In response to these challenges, MGF should develop a four-year sustainability plan aimed at strengthening coordination structures and the operational capacity of local CSOs, while also promoting cooperation among key stakeholders. This plan should maintain a clear thematic focus on certain women's rights, rather than broader gender issues.

Secondly, it is important to highlight that MGF is an ISF project—not a civil society umbrella or apex organisation. Thus, the report explores considerations for MGF's internal project planning, including the functioning of the steering committee (or broadening of it), linkages with other ISF projects, and planning for a future exit phase.

Finally, the report provides conclusions and recommendations to inform the design of the MGF programme for 2026–2029.

2. Methodology

All informants were selected before the researchers/advisers arrived in the field. The selection was based on conversations between the MGF manager and the advisers, who together identified relevant stakeholders already engaged with MGF—either as ISF's partners, receiving communities of trainings, or participants in grassroots dialogues. In addition, CSOs and CBOs in the area, as well as representatives from the two counties, were considered vital contributors, offering perspectives on urgent needs, the stage of gender equality in the region, and where MGF could potentially improve. Institutions such as religious networks (churches and mosques), as well as universities including both staff and student bodies, were also included.

This report relied on qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews with key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) with the representatives and groups noted above. Since the review was not intended to provide a quantitative summary or measure against DAC standards, the open approach allowed for richer insights into the perspectives of local stakeholders. Data was triangulated by posing similar questions to different KIIs and FGDs, as well as to MGF and ISF staff, and by reviewing existing statistics from Kisii and Nyamira. ISF's annual project data and local analyses were used, alongside SHD reports and other available sources.

Both advisers have backgrounds in anthropology and social sciences. The data was analysed through thematic content analysis, focusing on recurring themes across interviews and discussions, while also noting incoherences or inconsistencies. The observations were compared against each other to identify which patterns and themes were most prominent. Some of the issues raised may not be fully addressed within the

Commented [DN1]: Yes there is need to streamline or prioritize the areas of focus so that we can effectively develop a program that will be easy to evaluate and realize goals.

Commented [SL2]: [Jenna Ketunen](#) haluatko lisää jotain?

Commented [SL3R2]: Laitetaan tähän vielä refecjä

Commented [JK4R2]: Tosi hyvä. Ei lisättävää.

scope of the current project. Nevertheless, they remain important and ethically relevant, and they provide insight into how MGF might evolve after the exit phase, including what responsibilities could be transitioned, how, and to whom, in the future.

3. MGF's Role in Strengthening Local Civil Society

The first chapter outlines the role and focus areas of MGF within its operating environment, particularly in relation to civil society, local communities, county governments, and other institutions. Across all interviews, MGF was consistently described as playing an important role *vis-à-vis* civil society — not as a civil society actor itself, but as a convenor and/ or facilitator of cooperation. In particular, planning and mapping of different actors, campaigns, and ongoing projects was seen as an area where many would appreciate support, including better communication about MGF's own projects and campaigns to CSOs in the region. The capacity-building role was also considered significant. For 2026–29, MGF should facilitate CSO coordination while maintaining a focus on gradually handing over the coordination responsibilities to the local network.

CSOs in the Gusii region have a limited cooperation with government agencies, research institutions, commissions, regulatory bodies, and the private sector. When cooperation does occur, it is usually tied to the implementation of specific projects—often in the health or agriculture sectors. Yet, all stakeholders expressed that greater collaboration would be mutually beneficial and called for more structured and sustained cooperation. Here MGF can play a key role in supporting local CSOs to establish collaborative structures and partnerships. Promising entry points include Kisii University, student unions and clubs, and religious denominations—spaces where cooperation could be both strategic and sustainable.

Commented [DN5]: This aligns well with our initial discussion with Maria and what we are piloting this year 2025. excited to incorporate the learnings in the next funding season 26/29

3.1. Strengthening the CSO network's capacity and strategy in Kisii and expansion in Nyamira

There is a nascent cooperation and coordination of various actors in Kisii and Nyamira county- as well as regional level. Examples include the Agriculture Stakeholder Forum, which brings together 35 public, private, and CSO actors; the ISF-run FSTP project, which convenes grassroots groups and activists to prevent GBV; a network of women professionals; and CECOME, which facilitates cooperation and networking among smaller actors. In 2023 CSOs launched the Kisii CSO Network to bring together diverse civil society actors and increase their impact. A similar network in Nyamira is still missing, although some Nyamira CSOs have joined the Kisii network. The network is significant as it is an organically civil society–born network that can operate independently, unlike the county-led technical working groups on gender and child protection, which include CSO members but function under the national gender policy framework. Therefore, we see MGF's role vital to support the sustainability and organization of this CSO network.

The Kisii CSO Network has a heterogeneous membership, ranging from small CBOs to international non-governmental organisations (INGOs). The network has established a few technical working groups and has organized joint trainings and discussions. However, its goals and focus remain unclear due to this diversity and the lack of clear leadership. Network members identified several emerging thematic issues in Kisii, including drug and alcohol abuse and the resulting violent behaviour and mental health issues among men, sexual violence in public places, intimate partner violence (IPV), female genital mutilation (FGM), women's economic hardship and limited access to services, and women's lack of inheritance or access to land due to cultural reasons. However, the role of the CSO network in addressing these varied issues from the perspective of each CSO's expertise, such as child protection, psychological assistance, or agricultural support for women's cooperatives, is not fully defined.

The Kisii CSO network is currently in the process of registration and has an interim chair and vice-chair. However, there are no established leadership, operational management, or transparent decision-making structures in place, such as how leadership should be structured, elected, or rotated, nor a clear plan for funding its facilitation (currently, there is no funding). Interviewed members identified several challenges in the network's functioning and decision-making: members tend to work in isolation, and joint activities mostly occur only on international days. Even then, there is a lack of coordination or awareness about which campaigns are taking place and where other actors, such as county or religious institutions, are involved, notably during the 16 Days of Activism, African Child Day, Women's Day and International Day against FGM.

While MGF already collaborates with the CSO Network in Kisii, by participating in meetings and serving as a link between the county and the network, in Nyamira the CSOs have not yet registered as a network. In the future, MGF should therefore support mapping the existing CSOs, assist with registration, and help build operational capacity by strengthening working and decision-making structures, enhancing skills, and increasing cooperation with relevant stakeholders. A fruitful platform already exists, as Kisii County has invited CSO Network representatives to some discussions, demonstrating a willingness to collaborate with CSOs—collaboration that would be easier to facilitate through a strong and organised network.

MGF's contribution could be in supporting both networks (with Kisii already established) to develop their strategies and action plans in a transparent and accountable manner. It is important that member organizations retain the independence to define the network's goals and decide how to operate within existing resources—for example, by pooling staff and leadership. Potential activities could include organizing CSO discussions on strategic goals and advocacy agendas; implementing joint community campaigns during international days; advocating with the county governments; establishing a resource bank of approaches, methods, and tools; and creating peer support mechanisms to access funding. Alternatively, a membership fee could be introduced, though this may pose challenges for very small local CBOs.

3.2. Facilitating Research Collaboration between Kisii University and CSOs

CSOs conduct assessments, studies, surveys, and evaluations. They also have close, long-standing relationships with marginalized groups and communities, giving them practical experience of local

challenges, needs, and opportunities. Similarly, local universities—especially in Kenya—have a tradition of conducting hands-on research that benefits local populations.

However, in Gusii, no organic or systematic cooperation has yet emerged between CSOs and researchers or students in the Kisii university. While university staff occasionally conducts research consultancies for CSOs, INGOs, and government they are project specific, and the results are not further disseminated. MoUs tend to be one-off actions without consistent follow-ups. Furthermore, this type of research is not linked to students training, thus excluding them from such processes.

Kisii University itself is well-organized in terms of its gender mainstreaming policy, which it developed even before the county adopted one. Although the policy mainly focuses on balancing gender representation in certain bodies and groups, sexual harassment prevention, and inclusive policies for pregnancy and new mothers, it has been an important step toward organizing in gender-sensitive matters. When it comes to conducting studies and disseminating findings, there seems to be a gap. Kisii University has a gender department that produces local knowledge about issues related to gender equality, particularly on women's rights. Still, a lack of reliable qualitative information and statistics was a common challenge for all interviewed actors—especially on marginalized groups or sensitive topics such as sexual violence, sex work, IPV and FGM.

Because CSOs have strong community ties that help identify critical groups and research topics—and facilitate access to sensitive information—MGF should foster discussions and cooperation between CSOs and the Kisii university. MGF can also coordinate CSOs in identifying joint research priorities that inform effective project planning and implementation and respond to urgent local data needs. In addition, ISF could assess its own requirements for sensitive data, such as on the medicalization of FGM, with MGF coordinating related research in collaboration with Kisii University as part of the ISF program.

Based on discussions with Kisii University leadership and staff, research cooperation can be promoted through the Postgraduate Department and the Department of Innovation and Research. The University's Gender Mainstreaming Committee can also play a role by emphasizing the importance of gender-focused research. Cooperation with students can be facilitated through the Student Affairs Office, which can connect CSOs to the relevant academic departments. For longer-term collaboration, signing MoUs would be a useful step. To help structure and sustain this cooperation, it would be helpful to identify focal persons within each relevant department and the Gender Mainstreaming Committee. These individuals could serve as key contact points—both for initiating new research or disseminating studies and for informing MGF and other CSOs about upcoming events and opportunities for engagement.

To strengthen the capacity to use existing studies, MGF can organize CSO learning visits to the university and participate in research dissemination events. All studies and articles are published online by the Research and Extension Office (which can be found in the university library too) and these resources should be better utilized by both CSOs and government actors. Practical methods to do so might emerge through joint events where different stakeholders meet around research topics. Internally, and after considering copyright issues, MGF could publish selected studies and research articles on its website and highlight key findings through its social media channels. The university library also maintains links to community libraries, which can be used for trainings and other dissemination purposes.

Commented [DN6]: We need to prioritize areas of research, data utilization modalities and how to connect research with societal expectation.

Commented [JK7]: Mun muistiinpanoista löytyi vain ... gender monitoring data to support internal decision making of the university and research on emerging themes, e.g. social media harassment.

Commented [SL8R7]: Katson vielä

Commented [DN9]: @Ireneous Mutile Itung'u we agreed to have this started immediately. Ita the first step before we start engagement with the university.

3.3. Fostering Youth Inclusion

Educated youth are increasingly aware of gender equality challenges and the divisions between generations, as well as between urban and rural areas. Many students at Kisii University come from villages in the Gusii region, but their worldview often differs from that of their parents' generations. As part of the university curriculum, students also engage in community outreach work in the region. In doing so, they are often seen as positive role models within their communities. However, the extent to which this community work influences their academic research or studies remains unclear or appears limited. Currently, the outreach seems to be more voluntary in nature, but it holds greater potential if better integrated with research and academic programmes.

The university has about 290 student clubs that implement activities in communities and do awareness raising campaigns. There are, for example, Human Rights Club and Peer GBV Counselling Club and medicine students are very active. Student clubs have implemented some joint campaigns and trainings with CSOs in International Days, but very little joint data collection and research. Student leaders suggested organising joint campaigns and trainings with CSO and MGF, such as Inter-Generational Dialogues, FGM awareness raising with urban youth, early marriage and early pregnancy campaigns and talks among students, and youth change makers that can visit communities and talk about alternative futures and options in life. Such campaigns could be also conducted via student outreach activities but be better organised when done in joint mission with CBO's or even with MGF set-up forums.

While Kisii University is currently represented in the MGF steering committee, this representation is limited to university staff. Students expressed concern that the staff does not reflect their needs or ideas. One key suggestion was that MGF should engage student organizations more meaningfully—both by including them in its structures (such as the MGF steering committee) and, more importantly, in activity planning and implementation. Above all, MGF should facilitate stronger linkages and cooperation between the CSO Network and students' groups, including youth-led CSOs.

One promising example to highlight is the student-established, cross-sectoral research group Western Region Research and Innovation Consortia, which has already developed applied solutions such as a virus epidemic app and a GBV referral mechanism app. MGF could play a key role as a liaison or platform for presenting these innovations to relevant stakeholders, including county authorities, CSOs, and the private sector. ISF should also consider integrating such promising student initiatives into its programme interventions. For example, the future ISF youth hub-project could partner with the Western Region Research and Innovation Consortia. MGF or FSTP could provide research stipends to students for topics co-identified with CSOs. In addition, MGF or the youth hub project could organise regular platforms for students to present their solutions to CSOs and county government. These innovation groups should also be connected with institutions such as the Kenya Industrial Research and Development Institute (KIRDI) and relevant county programmes to strengthen uptake and impact.

3.4. CSO Engagement in National Anti-FGM Efforts

While there is growing coordination among CSOs at the county and regional levels (for example the national anti-FGM board), local CSOs and networks from Gusii remain largely absent from national-level processes. This is particularly concerning given that the Gusii region has the highest rates of medicalised FGM in

Kenya and substantial prevalence of IPV. Despite this, CSO representatives from Gusii region are rarely included in national or international stakeholder networks and they described Gusii working ‘in isolation’ or ‘in a vacuum.’

As an ISF-funded and managed project, MGF has an access to national and international platforms and is therefore well-placed to advocate for the inclusion of Gusii-based CSOs in broader FGM prevention efforts. It should actively facilitate linkages between local CSOs and national-level movements to bring the Gusii agenda into national policy and advocacy spaces.

This increased visibility would not only raise awareness of the specific challenges and efforts in the region but also improve access to data and the documentation of FGM-related trends in Gusii. Furthermore, showcasing the work of local CSOs could increase their chances of accessing international consortia and funding opportunities—something still notably limited in the region. Such connections would also contribute to the long-term sustainability of these CSOs, reducing their current dependency on county government and the few international actors present, including ISF.

4. MGF’s Role in Strengthening CSO–County Policy Collaboration

In Kenya, the local government system (devolution) is only a decade old: it was introduced in the 2010 Constitution, and the first County governments were elected in 2013. Counties are still learning how local governments function and how they can cooperate with other stakeholders, which makes capacity building, information sharing, and the creation of cooperation structures crucial for supporting county governments and strengthening the role of CSOs. County policy development begins, at least in principle, at the local level, with counties co-authoring policies such as the Gender Mainstreaming Policy (GMP) together with stakeholders, including community representatives. Although MGF and local CSOs have been engaged in the most recent GMP planning, discussions with CBOs and other representatives revealed that citizens often do not know when, where, or how to participate in county-level decision-making. Government representatives acknowledged these challenges, noting weak civic education on decision-making and that the process has not always been genuinely participatory, especially for CSOs and CBOs. We see policymaking, and the subsequent action plans for implementation, as vital platforms to establish and strengthen county–CSO networks and wider community cooperation structures. Already, county governments have passed the GMP in Kisii and the Child Protection Policy (CPP) in Nyamira, creating opportunities for integration and full implementation, while the upcoming passage of the GMP in Nyamira and confirmation of the CPP Kisii will provide further moments to engage from the earliest stages of policy planning.

The county policies have a five-year strategy and implementation plan. Kisii’s GMP will be launched in May–June 2025, while Nyamira County has a draft GMP that still requires refinement with key stakeholders. The process activity plan is already developed, with a deadline set for June 2026. To promote CSO and community participation, MGF should obtain the plan and share it widely with CSOs. The County Gender Steering Committees lead the process, but budget priorities are identified at ward level, which makes CSO

Commented [MS10]: Does MGF project or ISF country office (or both) have the access? Some suggestions can also be given to the ‘permanent’ country team (not only ‘temporary’ MGF project) regarding how to promote Gusii CSOs’ role in various networks

Commented [JK11R10]: We discussed also this, how ISF should promote participation of ISF local staff in national thematic discussions, especially in FGM. But we did not include it here because this report is about MGF and will be red by others than ISF staff.

Commented [MS12]: [in Debon](#), any information on how the [Anti-FGM Board Kisii Specific CAP in ending FGM 2021-25.pdf](#) implementation has materialized and if anything similar is underway for Nyamira?

and women's groups' participation in ward discussions particularly important. Civic education on these devolution processes is needed for ISF, partners, communities, and other stakeholders.

In 2024, Nyamira County approved and endorsed the CPP as an outcome of the National Children's Act, although funds for implementation have not yet been released and discussions on financing are still ongoing. Child protection is led at the national level, with the central government monitoring how counties deliver on child protection. The Directorate for Children Services and its Technical Working Group, appointed by the central government, play a key role in this process.

Once the GMP and CPP are finalized in both counties, they will be converted into strategies and implementation programmes. According to interviewees, county revenue income can only cover part of the GMP plan, including the separate GMP budget and sector-specific budgets. Co-implementation and cost-sharing with CSOs, INGOs, and other donors will therefore be necessary.

In Kenya, 'gender-specific budgets' (budgets that aim to increase women's and girls' participation and rights) mainly come from the central government, though some funds are allocated from counties' own resources. The same applies to higher education budgets, including TVET, while health and basic education are covered mainly from county revenues. Counties can prepare their own action plans and budgets independently, and every sector has the option to mainstream gender into its budget. However, bilateral and multilateral ODA negotiations are always conducted at central government level, which earmarks funds for specific counties.

According to the country representatives, the policies' implementation plans should also determine how budgets are allocated to achieve their goals. For example, for the GMP to be fully actualized, funding should be distributed across different departments of local government, not only for example health or gender departments. Here the key is cooperation with CSOs from different sectors—for instance, engaging agricultural departments to cross-check gender mainstreaming with CSOs working in agriculture and ensure resources are used in the most effective way.

4.1. CSO Participation and Research Integration in GMP Processes

As counties are responsible for their own development projects, they also act as coordinators between different sectors and actors. County governments bring together CSOs, private and public actors, and citizens, benefiting from their knowledge while also disseminating information and facilitating inclusive discussions that shape political decision-making.

MGF can support this role by promoting stronger CSO coordination (chapter 2.1.1.) and by advocating for long-term cooperation mechanisms between county governments and CSOs in relation to the GMP and CPP. This will strengthen joint planning, co-creation, and cost-sharing in the future. Regarding MGF's own project outputs, it is not possible to make detailed thematic recommendations without reviewing the Kisii County GMP. However, MGF should carefully identify and select the specific policy goals to which the project can contribute thematically. The primary aim remains to ensure CSO inclusion in discussions and decision-making, enabling local CSOs to advocate for their missions and share their expertise.

Commented [MS13]: Does 'gender budget' refer to gender (equality) mainstreaming?

Commented [JK14R13]: There are specific gender budgets from central gov budget (not good term but that's how interviews called it) and then not additional gender specific budget but normal sectoral budgets where gender elements are mainstreamed (which also contribute to GMP strategic objectives when the strategy is ready).

Specific gender budgets also include ODA gender specific programmes chnalled through central treasury and normal national budget channels.

And if I recall correctly, there might be some gender mainstreaming capacitation budget regard to GMP application.

Commented [MS15R13]: Maybe use 'gender budget' if that's how interviewees call it and explain in 1-2 sentences in a footnote what it officially stands for

A research gap regarding VAWG and women's economic and social rights emerged as a key issue, with many stakeholders noting the need for more data to inform better decision-making. Counties, in particular, expressed interest in accessing reliable information, while the national SDHD is currently considered the only dependable source. However, no NGO or CSO should be responsible for primary data collection; counties should organize their own data collection and monitoring as part of policies such as the GMP.

Given that this research gap is a common challenge, MGF can facilitate the creation of research working groups and a joint data mapping and collection plan to support evidence-based decision-making and monitoring enabling CSOs to use this information in their action planning and advocacy work. In addition, MGF and CSOs could improve access to existing data (see chapter 2.2) and create platforms to ensure that existing surveys, studies, and datasets are utilized effectively in policy planning and implementation.

4.2. Gender Mainstreaming in Gusii Counties

County governments identified capacity sharing as a key means to enhance their contribution to the GMP, for example through MGF's support in facilitating training for various sectoral County Departments on gender mainstreaming, including gender-responsive budgeting. More specifically, MGF is asked to coordinate a pool of gender mainstreaming experts across sectors to promote practical understanding of gender mainstreaming and how inequalities manifest in different contexts.

Kisii County representatives suggested potential areas for MGF focus, including VAWG prevention and referral mechanisms, sexual exploitation of women and children in tea plantations, the increasing number of sex workers due to economic pressures, and sexual violence more broadly. They also highlighted the need for capacity building of key duty bearers during policy enforcement, such as village leaders, police, and health workers. While these activities are primarily the responsibility of local organizations, including ISF partners, MGF, together with the CSO network, could monitor the GMP strategy (priorities in the county plans to be funded by the county, central government, and development actors), development and implementation, and ensure that local civil society is kept informed of progress, steps, and emerging needs.

It is important to note that MGF is an ISF project with a specific focus on women's rights and civil society engagement. Gender mainstreaming should be intersectional, including men and boys. MGF's role is to facilitate coordination of expert support from CSOs to government actors. While county governments have their own capacity-building budgets, MGF can complement these efforts by providing trainings on the concept of gender mainstreaming, particularly in ISF-prioritized sectors with a women's rights focus. These could include VAWG (particularly FGM) and women's access to services, particularly for entrepreneurs and the self-employed. However, final decisions on training content should be based on the interconnected priorities of the GMP and the MGF 2026–29 project plan.

4.3. Promoting Active Citizenship and Dialogue on Sensitive Issues

As noted, knowledge sharing and participatory decision-making remain weak across counties. However, there appears to be willingness from both civil society and county authorities to engage more interactively in

Commented [JK16]: Suggestion from the County. I am not sure that this is MGF role (not civil society focus). County can and should do this, establish their own platforms, or not?

Commented [SL17R16]: Or maybe as part of technical working group assist but not to establish?

Commented [JK18R16]: They suggested a research WG, focus on supporting county monitoring on policies, especially GMP. Also, some points about joint data collection plan of CSOs and county to avoid overlapping in data collection and ensuring access to relevant data.

No mentioning about funding for this.

Commented [JK19R16]: [Suvi Lensu](#) jättäisin tämän kokonaan pois. On kunnan vastuu järjestää oma monitorointitiedonkeruu. Toisaalta osana lisääntyvää toimijoiden yhteistyötä, yhteistä tutkimusintresseistä voi tulla topic. Mutta meidän ei tarvitse sitä määritellä.

the future. Since CSOs are not always fully familiar with the processes and venues for advocacy, MGF could organize civic education sessions for CSOs on policy development and implementation in collaboration with the County Public Participation Department. MGF could also convene discussions on potential funding to support CSOs in organizing public dialogues on the GMP across all sub-counties.

As part of the GMP strategy, MGF together with other local CSOs could publish and disseminate the GMP to communities and women's groups, conducting civic education in community forums. This dissemination would raise awareness, highlight key topics, and educate citizens on opportunities for influence, thereby promoting empowerment and shifts in power. Discussions with women's groups on their priorities in county programmes could be facilitated by ISF partners as a model for other local CSOs. It is also essential to ensure that communities and women's groups are informed about the timing, location, and topics of public dialogues organized by the county.

Importantly, active citizenship training should cover child protection and children's rights, as many people in the region are unaware of these obligations, leading to frequent violations, according to Nyamira County representatives. Alongside VAW prevention, this represents an important focus area for MGF—educating communities on both their duties and rights in relation to county policies, particularly regarding the most vulnerable groups, such as children. Training should also include guidance on accessing available services and understanding sub-county level spaces where communities can influence decision-making.

Conversely, whilst communities in the Gusii region would benefit from further civic education to understand their rights and means to engage in advocacy, county MPs should also be encouraged to speak more openly about violations affecting vulnerable groups. For example, FGM, which is criminalized under Kenyan law, has one of the highest national prevalence rates in the Gusii region but is rarely publicly discussed by elected representatives, particularly men. One suggested approach is to organize breakfast meetings with politicians on sensitive topics they may avoid publicly, such as FGM, early marriage, or VAWG in general. These platforms could be co-hosted with CSO experts, religious leaders, and community representatives to foster open dialogue and build accountability.

5. MGF as a Development Project

Alongside its role in strengthening CSOs, MGF also implements activities aligned with ISF's programmatic outcomes. During the FGDS, it became clear that many stakeholders confused ISF partner projects with MGF's own initiatives, and several felt excluded from MGF's decision-making processes. While a steering committee exists, including some CSO members, outside this structure often lacked clarity about the project's mandate and activities. To reduce confusion about MGF's dual position as both facilitator and ISF-funded development project, suggested actions include clarifying the mandate of the steering committee, ensuring its broader and more inclusive participation, and organizing joint community forums in close collaboration with CSOs, CBOs, and religious institutions. MGF could further strengthen its legitimacy and impact by supporting joint data collection and research initiatives, particularly those focused on preventing VAWG and advancing women's economic empowerment.

Commented [MS20]: Why MGF and not the county itself?

Commented [DN21R20]: MGF in collaboration with the respective authority in the county of Nyamira and Kisii

Commented [JK22R20]: Also linked to the following sentence: dissemination allows awareness raising and highlighting some (ISF) topics, as well as civic education on opportunities for influence (empowerment and power shift). Also, it was acknowledged that local CSOs and ISF are not fully familiar with the process and venues for advocacy.

Commented [MS23]: Any overlapping risks with CSO Network if participation extended? How meaningful to extend if MGF is phasing out? I'd rather see MGF project setting clearly defined, distinct targets for its remaining life cycle, incl handing over certain roles gradually to CSO Network, counties etc

Commented [DN24R23]: Sure i agree ... some of the activities should focus on building the exit and sustainability plans

Commented [JK25R23]: Our point of view was that the broader and more inclusive participation is part of handing over.

Inclusive participation is required if MGF wants to build synergies between its own activities and activities of others on the same topics (MGF as a project chapter), incooperation is also possible to hand over prioritized activities to other actors. Also, inputs and cooperation with different actors on focused topics (FGM) requires inputs and insights of religious leaders, county, researchers, youth etc. This gives broader point of view for regional/national advocacy as well as improves implementation impact/quality.

Inclusive/broader meaning different actors not thematic focus of MGF that can be more focused than the thematic of actors involved (once again MGF as a project vs. MGF as enabler).

From various actors it is possible to facilitate permanent linkages to policy processes, CSO networks, cooperation between different actors etc.

Quick response in "short" very late in the afternoon 😊

As mentioned in the introduction, MGF has implemented the *Soko Freshi* project in recent years. While this initiative was viewed positively, stakeholders agreed that the next programming phase should not focus on running such activities directly, as the county government has already adopted the concept and will continue it in some form. This represents a strong example of how MGF's facilitation and advocacy role could also be taken forward by local actors at the end of the 26-29 programme. Nevertheless, supporting women's economic empowerment in the Gusii region should remain a priority for MGF, primarily through advocacy and by building stronger interconnections between key actors, including county-level structures.

5.1. Broadening the Steering Committee

MGF's steering committee brings together diverse stakeholders, including local CSO and CBO representatives, religious leaders, university staff, and county representatives. Members generally expressed satisfaction with their participation, noting that the meetings offer valuable opportunities to exchange information about projects, campaigns, and pressing community issues.

It is important to distinguish the MGF steering committee from the CSO Network. While the CSO Network is an independent platform for local CSOs to collaborate, the MGF steering committee exists specifically to guide and inform MGF's own project activities.

Key suggestions for strengthening the committee include expanding membership or introducing rotating roles, with a particular focus on increasing youth representation—for example, student organizations from Kisii University. Membership could also be broadened to include small-scale CBOs. Special attention should be paid to ensuring representation of marginalized groups, such as disability organizations, especially those led by people with disabilities in the Gusii community, who can provide lived-experience perspectives on inclusion.

Given the diverse and sometimes competing agendas of stakeholders, it is vital that the committee maintains a clear focus on MGF's goals and operational areas. The committee has the potential to strengthen coordination by aligning MGF activities with those of other stakeholders. Ultimately, however, MGF-funded activities must remain consistent with ISF's programmatic outcomes.

5.2. Community Forums Focused Outreach

Community forums have been a central part of MGF's work in recent years. These public events combine awareness raising, talks, panel discussions, music, and art performances to engage communities on gender equality issues, including VAWG and women's economic rights. They have been well-received, providing a platform for sensitive topics that are otherwise rarely discussed publicly.

As MGF transitions toward a more advocacy-focused role, these forums should be adapted so that MGF continues to act as a facilitator while stepping back from direct community work, leaving implementation to local CSOs. Forum planning should strategically involve other actors, leveraging CSO networks and FSTP partners to shape themes, target audiences, and local engagement. Rather than increasing the frequency of forums, they could be fewer but more focused, targeting specific communities or institutions such as

Commented [MS26]: Is it necessary to include this as SF has hardly been addressed in the report, and it has already been excluded from the 2025- work plan?

Commented [JK27R26]: It was mentioned and valued (this is review), and ISF decision to transfer this to county was strengthened (review result on the future of MGF). Following sentence links to the wishes how MGF instead could address WEE issues in the future (review result on the future of MGF).

Can be taken off if someone finds it important to leave this out of the report.

Commented [MS28R26]: No need to leave out but rather needs a bit of background as it now emerges first time on page 11 without any explanation what it is and how it relates to the wider MGF project

Commented [SL29]: Do we want to include GMP and CPP goals as part of the MGF outputs in the new programme?

Commented [JK30R29]: Note: ...because policies direct budgeting, development programmes and country activities with revenue budget.

Commented [MS31]: Which, however, have some similarities to CSO Network activities, right?

Commented [JK32R31]: Community outreach activities might have similarities to CSO, University, student groups and FBOs and congregations.

When it comes to coordination and advocacy, this means that the steering committee is not for example advising CSO contribution to GMP process (CSO network can coordinate and will include more thematics/sectors than MGF project), but looking at MGF role as enabler and advising on that.

secondary schools, religious and community leaders, or private sector actors (e.g., tea plantations or boda boda drivers). For example, a forum in a given village could include a CSO specializing in mental health as a driver of VAWG or one focused on women's access to land.

FGDs identified urgent thematic areas for public forums, including drug and alcohol abuse (and associated violence and mental health issues among men), sexual violence, IPV, FGM, and women's economic hardship and limited access to assets and services. MGF should clearly define which issues it can realistically address and prioritise forums accordingly.

While MGF has already taken steps in this direction, future forums should feature more inclusive and coordinated planning. Importantly, MGF's forums should remain distinct from CSO network activities: in its own forums, MGF takes the lead with input from the steering committee, whereas in CSO network activities, MGF participates as a member without structuring or directing the process.

Forums should also function as two-way channels, bringing local concerns to county governments while feeding government information back to communities. This could be supported through civic education sessions on GMP and CPP processes (see Chapter 2.1.3).

5.3. Collaboration with Religious Leaders and Institutions

Religious denominations cover every corner in Gusii region, and in addition to churches and mosques they have own schools, medical centres, projects and organisations. Different religious denominations are actively collaborating through the Inter-Faith Network that is a part of national network led by the Inter-Religious Council of Kenya. They already work on several same topics than CSOs, such as positive parenting, conflict resolution in relation to property and inheritance, mental health (ADRA), GBV prevention and reporting and referral process, and drug and alcohol abuse counselling.

Given the overlapping focus areas, MGF should actively facilitate collaboration between religious leaders and CSOs, especially in efforts to prevent FGM—including progressive Islamic religious leaders in urban areas of Kisii. MGF could draw from the experiences and lessons of ISF-supported projects in Somaliland, where religious leaders have effectively raised awareness about the health risks of FGM and clarified that it is not a religious obligation, countering a common misconception.

Another important area for joint development is improving support systems for survivors of IPV and sexual violence, which both are rampant across the Gusii region. Strengthening referral pathways and linking religious leaders with CSOs offering legal aid—such as through paralegal services—and county structures (e.g., the single existing safe house, which is currently underutilized due to lack of awareness) would improve survivor support.

MGF-led forums co-organised with religious institutions offer a valuable platform and could be hosted in churches or mosques. However, it is essential to ensure that both the themes and facilitation methods align with ISF's values and policy commitments. Forums should not tolerate discriminatory rhetoric—such as homophobia—or promote female submissiveness as a strategy to prevent violence. While the value of

religious platforms in reaching wide audiences is acknowledged, MGF should ensure that all messaging is human-rights-based and inclusive.

In regard to the topic of gender equality—specifically gendered norms and roles—an interesting discussion on women in leadership revealed underlying contradictions in values and beliefs. Women can be leaders in public sphere if they know their place at home as a wife and mother. If women are in leadership position, it causes problems at home and can break a family, and it is women’s responsibility ‘to handle power’ and still let men rule. This causes practical and power challenge for women’s economic empowerment: women do not have time for productive work, and they do not have any power over resources. New reality requires new masculinity and family power relations and religious groups are not good allies when discussing on family decision making on money, time and property. At the same time, it was noted that religious leaders are often the first point of contact for families experiencing conflict or IPV, especially when tensions arise over the use or control of resources. This dual role underscores the importance—but also the limitations—of engaging religious actors in efforts to challenge and shift harmful gender norms.

To conclude, collaboration with religious leaders requires careful topic selection, joint planning, and agreed-upon principles of communication. It is also important to distinguish between cases where religious leaders are the primary target group and where they act as allies. For example, co-producing media content with religious leaders may pose reputational risks or mixed messaging if not well coordinated.

5.4. Topics included in MGF advocacy and influence

As mentioned, a wide range of issues have emerged as important in the Gusii region, but MGF cannot advocate on all of them directly. By supporting CSO Network’s capacity and organisational structures, MGF already contributes to the broader identification and response to emerging topics. However, when MGF actively engages in advocacy—both in the community and in county-level forums—the evaluators recommendation is to focus on matters that have been clearly highlighted by CSOs and then prioritised according to how they fit within the ISF’s development programme. These could include, for example:

- GBV prevention and response, particularly due to increasing awareness and shifts in attitudes among survivors, which in turn increase demand for referral mechanisms and responsive services. This aligns with national and county GBV response plans—which, however, have not been fully effective (e.g. inactive GBV desks). While MGF is not a service provider, it can use its convening power to advocate for accountability and improvement.
- Women’s access to land, inheritance, and property rights, a persistent structural inequality in the region, deeply linked to both legal gaps and cultural barriers.
- Child protection and children’s rights, especially in relation to corporal punishment, child neglect, and early responsibilities in the home, where there is limited awareness of rights or existing laws.
- Civic space and participation, especially at sub-county level, where mechanisms for influencing local development planning exist but remain underused or unknown to most citizens.

By focusing on these key areas, MGF can remain strategic and impactful, while ensuring its advocacy aligns with both grassroots priorities and programme-level commitments.

5.5. Research and Communications

In addition to its role in research facilitation (see Chapter 3.3), MGF can strengthen the relevance and effectiveness of the ISF programme by undertaking its own data collection and research activities in collaboration with Kisii University, student groups, and other expert institutions. ISF should first assess its information needs—such as data on the medicalisation of FGM—and MGF could coordinate related research in partnership with academic and professional actors, including key institutions like ACCAF at Nairobi University, which leads FGM research in East Africa. At a minimum, data from ISF partner project mid-term and final evaluations, as well as annual monitoring processes, should inform MGF’s activities and be disseminated to relevant stakeholders to support evidence-based dialogue, advocacy, and programme planning.

MGF communications play a complementary role in amplifying the visibility and voice of local civil society. Observations and discussions with CSOs, CBOs, and the MGF communications team revealed that many CSOs are insufficiently aware of each other’s campaigns or activities, and communities often have little knowledge of these efforts. Strengthened communications would enhance local CSO visibility, open opportunities for funding and collaboration, and support the FSTP project.

To achieve this, MGF should develop a clear communications strategy aligned with its overall purpose: to increase the visibility, resilience, and voice of local civil society. Actions could include regularly highlighting CSO work during key campaigns, featuring expert interviews or articles on priority issues, and promoting forums and public events to support civic education. Clear goals for MGF media work will sharpen strategy, strengthen local networks, and provide engaging content for broader ISF communications.

5.6. Sustainability and Exit Phase

The years 2026–2029 will constitute the exit phase of the MGF project. This phase should outline a clear strategy and procedures for the orderly conclusion of the project, aiming to minimize disruption to stakeholders and ensure that key knowledge is retained for future use. The exit plan should detail the necessary steps, responsibilities, timelines, and documentation for disengagement. Core elements include a handover plan for responsibilities, a communication strategy to inform stakeholders about the project’s closure, and a final evaluation capturing lessons learned.

It is recommended that the exit strategy be reviewed and updated into a more focused 1–2-year plan in 2027 or 2028. While MGF is currently an ISF-led initiative, there is potential for it to continue in some form in the next programme cycle 2030–2034. If so, it could evolve into a more clearly CSO-led project, focused on facilitating forums and carrying out a well-defined role—not as a general civil society support mechanism, but as a structured platform embedded within the broader programme architecture.

Importantly, sustainability should guide the project planning for the 2026–2029 programme by selecting topics, thematic areas, activities, and targeting stakeholder capacity building in ways that serve both the long-term interests of civil society in the Gusii region and align with ISF’s programme priorities. This collaboration requires careful consideration of which of the recommendations are included in the next four-year planning cycle.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

Throughout the study, it was consistently highlighted that MGF's primary role is to strengthen local civil society and to lead processes that require coordination among multiple actors, organizational capacity, and financial resources. All interviewees emphasized **MGF's value as a convenor and facilitator of cooperation**. At the same time, MGF's role as an implementing ISF project, with its own defined activities, was also clearly recognized.

The recommendations emerging from the interviews point to several broad action packages. In planning future interventions, ISF will need to prioritize options that best support continuity and sustainability. These two dimensions should be articulated as core outcomes in the MGF project's logical framework. Based on these conclusions, the following action packages are proposed for MGF's four-year plan.

Strengthening CSO networks was identified as a priority. In Kisii, where a CSO network is already established and registered, this would involve supporting its operationalisation, strategic development, and long-term sustainability, including mechanisms for pooled fundraising. In Nyamira, MGF's role would focus on facilitating the formation of a similar network or, alternatively, supporting the expansion of the Kisii CSO network to include and connect actors in Nyamira.

While CSOs themselves play a key expert role in knowledge production and in applying approaches and methodologies at community level, stronger collaborative capacity is required for joint planning, coordinated campaigns, and structured engagement with county governments and other relevant stakeholders, including academic institutions. In this regard, there is a clear need to emphasize **cross-sector collaboration** and to move beyond the current ad hoc cooperation between CSOs, academia, and the private sector.

Specifically, the study recommends promoting structured collaboration between CSOs and Kisii University, including **joint research initiatives, training, and dissemination activities**. This could be supported through the establishment of departmental focal points, as well as formal links to student clubs and outreach programmes. One of the most underutilized groups in current planning processes is youth, **including youth-led CSOs and university-based clubs**. Their engagement could be strengthened through involvement in campaigns, research stipends, and participation in platforms such as the Western Region Research and Innovation Consortia.

The study further highlighted that although certain forms of VAWG—such as IPV and medicalised FGM—are highly prevalent in the Gusii region, local CSOs with strong expertise in EAWG have limited or no access to national CSO networks and coordination platforms, such as the national Anti-FGM Board. Given MGF's particular positioning as part of an international NGO, it is recommended that MGF actively **support pathways for local CSOs to gain representation in national-level boards and forums**, where possible. In addition, CSO voices can be amplified through regular **social media features** and by sharing thematic stories that link grassroots work to broader advocacy.

Collaboration between CSOs and national gender mainstreaming policy processes was also identified as critical. In Kisii, the implementation period of the recently passed policy presents an important opportunity for CSOs to contribute and to strengthen collaboration with county ministries across different departments. In Nyamira, continued support to the drafting and advocacy for the adoption of a similar policy remains a priority.

Commented [JK33]: [Suvi Lenni](#) Tässä ehdotelma pikaisesti. Kaikki muutokset ja lisäykset mahdollisia 😊 Nyt täytyy alkaa tehdä muita hommia.

Commented [SL34R33]: Hei mä olin samaan aikaan kirjoittanut kans summauksia enkä nähnyt näitä sun> mun pointit on samat kuin sun mut vaan bulleteilla koska tykkään itse et loppuehdotukset on vaan nopeat ja selkeät ehdotukset mut voidaan muokkaa jotain siltä väliltä

Commented [JK35R33]: Mä tykkään myös bulleteista samoista syistä, mutta saan aina noottia Marialta asiasta. Nyt en enää jaksa näitä katsoa, olen tehnyt yli 9 tuntia töitä putkeen oikeastaan ilman taukoja. Pää on aivan sekaisin ja uuvuttaa. Jutellessaan huomenna pikaisesti. En taida huomenna näitä ehtiä sen tarkemmin kommentoia.

Commented [MS36R33]: Bulletit sopii oikein hyvin koontikappaleeseen; kartan niitä tekstin harmonisoinnin nimissä esim. vuosisuunnitelmissa ja -rapoissa jos niitä on esim vain yhden maan, teeman tm kohdalla 😊

Commented [MS37R33]: Mut täytynee siis yhdistää nää erinomaiseksi narratiiviksi kirjoitetut tiivistelmät alla oleviin bulleteihin; nyt päällekkäisyyttä - eli joko narratiivi tai bulletit, ei molempia, eikö?

Importantly, while MGF performs a coordination role, this should be undertaken as a facilitating and enabling function rather than one that assumes ownership of coordination processes. The intention is that, by the end of the four-year project period, there will be a **gradual transition of coordination responsibilities to local actors**. These actors should be adequately capacitated to lead CSO network operations and sustain collaboration with other stakeholders beyond the lifespan of the MGF project.

While MGF operates as a distinct development initiative running in parallel to CSO strengthening, it must remain **aligned with ISF's thematic outcomes**. Key activities under this alignment include the organization of thematic forums and the implementation of data collection and research to support VAWG prevention and enhance women's access to livelihoods. MGF could for example collaborate with Kisii University, student groups, and other institutions to **conduct research** aligned with ISF information needs, such as the medicalization of FGM, and to use the evidence generated to inform its activities and broader advocacy. Data from ISF partner project reviews and annual reporting should be integrated into MGF planning and shared with stakeholders to support evidence-based dialogue.

To date, MGF has gained strong visibility and community recognition through its direct organization of community forums addressing these two thematic areas. As MGF's role evolves, it is recommended that it **gradually move away from actively hosting forums itself and instead adopt a more facilitative function**. This would involve supporting communities in the Gusii area to engage directly with relevant CSOs, researchers, and county representatives. Such an approach would strengthen civic engagement, increase stakeholder accountability to communities, and foster closer, more sustained connections between communities and duty bearers.

Under this revised approach, **forums may be held less frequently but designed to be more targeted and impactful**. They should be co-organized with other actors and used as platforms for meaningful two-way communication between communities and county governments. Key thematic areas identified by communities for continued or expanded focus include drug and alcohol abuse and associated violence and mental health challenges among men; sexual violence, intimate partner violence, and FGM; and women's economic hardship, including limited access to assets and services.

Looking ahead, **policy participation, civic education**, and structured engagement with county representatives will become increasingly important in the community forums. This could include forums focused on opportunities to influence policy implementation, understanding policy timelines, and engaging in ward-level budgeting processes. Additional areas of engagement include supporting county departments on gender mainstreaming and evidence-based planning, as well as using discreet dialogue formats to address sensitive issues such as FGM and early marriage.

Particularly noteworthy is the potential for strengthened **collaboration with religious institutions and interfaith networks**. Engagement in this area should focus on shared concerns—such as parenting, family wellbeing, and IPV—while carefully navigating resistance to more politically sensitive gender issues. Forums addressing VAWG may be hosted within religious institutions, including churches and mosques, provided that content remains aligned with ISF values, is inclusive and non-discriminatory, and avoids reinforcing harmful narratives, such as homophobia or the portrayal of female submissiveness as a solution to violence.

While MGF is managed by ISF staff, it is guided by a **Steering Committee** whose role is advisory and specific to the MGF project. This role is distinct from that of the CSO network, which functions as an independent coordination space for local CSOs. Interviewees recommended several measures to enhance the Steering Committee's diversity, transparency, and effectiveness. These include expanding membership, introducing rotating roles, and strengthening youth and student representation. It is also important to clearly



define and maintain the Committee's focus on MGF's specific objectives, given the diversity of stakeholder interests represented.

Finally, **the exit strategy** should include a clear handover plan, transparent communication with stakeholders, and a final evaluation. It is recommended that the current exit plan be revised into a more focused one- to two-year strategy to be implemented in 2027 or 2028.