Why Agency? Reflections on impact reported across CARE's Gender Equality Framework

As a global organization with ambitious goals, it is imperative we can measure impact so we can continuously identify what's working, where there may be gaps, and whether we're on track to achieve our vision. CARE's evidence of impact on individual agency highlights clear areas of achievement—while also providing opportunity to reflect on how we can replicate this across all areas of women's lives.

CARE's **Gender Equality Framework (GEF)** was developed to assist CARE staff in conceptualizing and planning gender equality work. Our theory of change is based on CARE's experience that achieving gender equality requires transformative change.

The aim is to **build agency** of people of all genders and life stages, **change relations** between them and **transform structures** in order that they realize full potential in their public and private lives and are able to contribute equally to, and benefit equally from, social, political and economic development.
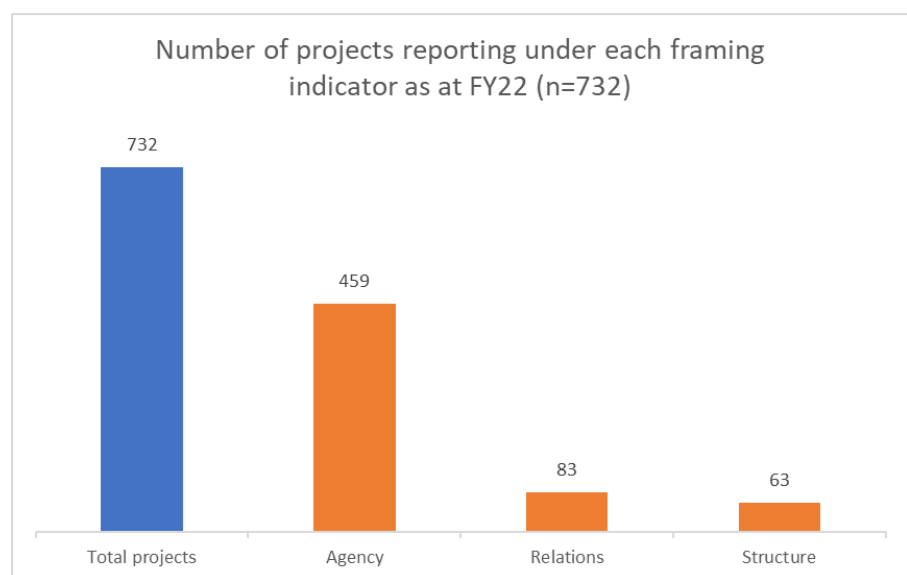
Every year, CARE projects worldwide submit impact data into PIIRS, our global reporting system, under 30 core global indicators. The data under these indicators contribute to reporting under three **framing indicators**—"umbrella" indicators which help us consolidate and aggregate impact data from all programs, projects, and initiatives under the three domains of CARE's Gender Equality Framework.

Analysis of what has been reported under each of these framing indicators offers greater insight into progress and identifies potential ways forward. In this brief we summarize notable findings and reflections from program teams on what we are seeing and how we can improve this.

Emerging trends

Impact data is cumulative over a strategy period and FY22 was the second year for the current Vision 2030 strategy. With two years of data now in the system, two trends have emerged:

1 **Low levels of impact reporting against the three framing indicators**—despite many projects reporting gender integration in programming for several years.

2 Projects that do report impact tend to **contribute to the agency domain**, more so than under relations and structures.

Number of projects reporting under each framing indicator as at FY22 (n=732)

Total projects	732
Agency	459
Relations	83
Structure	63

To reflect on this data and explore why and how these trends were appearing, CARE held two global sensemaking sessions in April 2023. These brought together staff across all roles, geographies and sectors to ask:

1. Why are we seeing more impact reporting under the Agency framing indicators than Relations and Structures?
2. What can CARE do to change this?

Reflections

Design & Planning: It was observed that higher reporting under agency may be linked to the design phase, indicating less work may be planned in the relations and structures domains.

INSIGHT: Relations and structures need to be considered from the outset →
- Projects may not be integrating the three domains into the design of a project or program.
- CARE's program approaches tend towards agency-related activities, more so than relations and structures, which may result in the skew towards working in that domain. Staff have access to resources and approaches to support working within the agency domain, so agency may end up dominating activity plans and measurement exercises.

Measurement: Sensemaking participants suggested impact may be happening, but the challenge lies in the measurement and reporting.

INSIGHT: Capturing agency impact is easier →
- Agency indicators are easier to apply, with many tools available, and can be measured by working directly with the individuals who experienced the change in a shorter time cycle (e.g., participation in a training translates into reported increase in capability in that area).
- CARE and partners can gather agency-related data themselves rather than needing to engage authorities or government. Measuring change in agency is often under CARE's direct control.
- Relations and structures indicators are more difficult to track, including more complex concepts like social norms that are harder to both measure and achieve, especially in short project cycles.
- Projects may miss reporting impact into PIIRS if the change or the measurement happens after the project closes in the system.

INSIGHT: Knowledge for complex data collection needs to be fostered →
- Low levels of reporting may be a sign the indicators themselves are not well understood.
- Partner organisations may not have the same capacity as CARE for complex measurement, considering time, staffing, budget, and knowledge.
- CARE staff themselves may need more clarity and awareness of these framing indicators and the reporting process, including more access to tools and resources to measure changes in relations and structures.
- The methodologies for this measurement are complex and are more likely to involve another area of challenging measurement: advocacy.

Timing: Sensemaking participants highlighted the different timescales that need to be considered when comparing change in agency to change in relations and structures.

INSIGHT: Changes in relations and structures take more time →
- Projects may choose to only target agency because this is all that is possible in the given timeframe. It might be strategically desirable to seek 'quick wins', or the choice may be informed by donor priorities.

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- Change in agency can be linked to one-off activities, so data will be available in a more immediate timeframe.
- It might not be realistic to expect impact in relations and structures to be evident per project, especially if a program takes a long-term strategy of phasing or building this change over time (e.g., starting with a focus on change in agency and building towards change in relations and structures with subsequent projects).
- A lack of funding or planning for ex-post measurement may mean this change cannot be measured by the project after it closes. Relational change may be generational and change from advocacy initiatives can also be slow to appear.

Barriers: Sensemaking participants suggested that there may be more barriers to change in the domains of relations and structure, than agency.

INSIGHT: Change in relations and structures is easier in theory than in practice →

- Partners and stakeholders may be less resistant to changes in agency, compared to larger-scale change.
- A donor may prioritise a different approach that influences a project or even just influence the indicators that are required, which drives design, reporting, and data collection priorities.
- There may not be enough resources to work in the 'bigger' areas of relations and structures.
- There are more political implications for working in relations and structures, there may be deeply ingrained social norms, and there may be instability in a society.
- It requires increased system level engagement, including working with government.

Recommendations
Planning & Design

RECOMMENDATION: To achieve change across all three domains, CARE programs need to be intentional in their design, to incorporate all three domains.

- The Gender Equality Framework should be the starting point for design, to ensure program approaches, plans, and resources incorporate this work.
- Planning should include program, MEAL, and gender colleagues because these functions need to work together to be able to deliver and measure impact.
- Program approaches must align with the Gender Equality Framework and data gathering methodologies must consider the framing indicators and how impact will be captured. This may need guidelines to be developed on how to design projects across all three domains of the Gender Equality Framework.
- The design also needs to take a longer-term focus. This may include advocating for longer term funds, or sequencing projects to work through the agency, relations, and structures over time.
- Learning cycles should reinforce understanding of how to achieve change and gender technical support needs to be throughout the project and not only during reporting periods.

Training and developing expertise

RECOMMENDATION: Staff need to have the same level of knowledge of the key concepts and have access to concrete examples of programming across all three domains. Key skills and actions identified by sensemaking participants included:

- Specialist gender and MEL expertise to ensure the design and measurement integrates the three domains.
- Strengthened ability of MEL teams to better capture system-level impact, with access to a repository of tools for measurement of relations and structures impacts.

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- Broader understanding of the GEF and associated measurement across relations and structures, using modalities such as webinars and socializing more content, activities, and approaches within the confederation. This knowledge needs to go beyond headquarters to country teams.
- A strengthened understanding of the CARE global core indicators.
- Working with program focal points to encourage the strategic applications of the Gender Marker tool, to inform this work.
- More time and resources devoted to strengthening partner capability to measure impact across these domains.
- Looking at processes that bridge the gap between those who design projects, those who report and those who use the data.

💡 **RECOMMENDATION:** As well as strengthening MEAL knowledge, participants identified many specific MEAL approaches that could be considered:

- Planning for ex-post evaluations or assessments, with extended time frames for data collection and analysis.
- Ensuring MEAL frameworks incorporate indicators that contribute to measuring impact under all three domains.
- Integrating methods such as observation that don't require self-reporting for change, capturing stories of change, and greater use of the AIIR tool for advocacy.
- More frequently measuring 'step changes' along the pathway to the ultimate change. By using proxy indicators to understand when the project is on a pathway to change that may be realised beyond the life of the project, a project may be able to report this step change within the life of the project.
- Promoting a 'good enough' approach so as not to overcomplicate relations and structures measurement and reporting.
- Sharing program learning from projects that have reported across the three domains, to promote the understanding of how to successfully measure and report against structures and relations, aiming to demystify the reporting process.
- Strategically reviewing large projects with gaps in framing indicator data, to identify why this might be and understand barriers to impact capture and reporting.
- Regular reflection and review, to understand the process of change and progress towards outcomes.

External support

💡 **RECOMMENDATION:** CARE needs to incorporate the Gender Equality Framework into work with partners, donors, and government, if programs are to increase impact and measurement.

- Projects need to work with and through government, to achieve systems level change.
- Donors must understand the Gender Equality Framework for CARE to obtain funding of activities beyond just those focusing on agency. This may involve sharing more information and evidence of how the Gender Equality Framework works to realise gender equality.
- CARE must work with partners to ensure a mutual understanding and identify where indicators could be integrated into joint measurement exercises.