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INTERSECTIONALITY IN EUROPEAN UNION PROGRAMMES: A CASE STUDY OF ENI CBC MED

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Abstract

This research aims to examine the extent to which the European Union integrates intersectionality into its development programmes, particularly in terms of understanding the socio-economic and political contexts of local communities, incorporating intersectional principles and empowering women. The European Neighbourhood Instrument for Cross-Border Cooperation in the Mediterranean (ENI CBC MED) is used as a case study as it is implemented on a large scale with 80 projects that aim to promote economic and social development and address common environmental challenges in the different societies of the Mediterranean region.

Although intersectionality is a relatively recent concept, it is used here as an evaluation framework to analyse discrimination and privilege. The research applies nine guiding principles of intersectionality: “intersecting categories”, “multi-level analysis”, “reflexivity”, “time and space”, “diverse knowledge”, “social justice”, “resilience and resistance”, “power” and “equity”— to assess programme design and implementation. Data was collected through interviews with project staff and beneficiaries.

The results show that the integration of intersectionality largely depended on the awareness and field experience of the project implementers and was not embedded in the official framework of the programme. While the programme paid attention to socio-economic contexts, political and cultural dimensions were often neglected. Concepts such as women’s empowerment were interpreted inconsistently and sometimes reduced to a narrow economic role, as intersectionality was only understood to a limited extent and was missing from the core of the programme.

This research highlights the need for European Union (EU) programmes to systematically integrate intersectional principles, ensuring more inclusive and context-sensitive development interventions.

Keywords: Intersectionality, European Union Programmes, ENI CBC MED, Women's Empowerment, Mediterranean Region Programmes.

Abstract Italian Language

Questa tesi si propone di esaminare in quale misura l'Unione Europea integri l'intersezionalità nei propri programmi di sviluppo, in particolare in relazione alla comprensione dei contesti socio-economici e politici delle comunità locali, all'incorporazione dei principi intersezionali e all'emancipazione delle donne. Come caso di studio viene utilizzato lo Strumento Europeo di Vicinato per la Cooperazione Transfrontaliera nel Mediterraneo (ENI CBC MED), in quanto attuato su larga scala con 80 progetti finalizzati a promuovere lo sviluppo economico e sociale e ad affrontare sfide ambientali comuni nelle diverse società della regione mediterranea.

Sebbene l'intersezionalità sia un concetto relativamente recente, essa viene qui impiegata come quadro di valutazione per analizzare discriminazioni e privilegi. Lo studio applica nove principi guida dell'intersezionalità — “categorie intersecanti”, “analisi multilivello”, “riflessività”, “tempo e spazio”, “saperi diversi”, “giustizia sociale”, “resilienza e resistenza”, “potere” ed “equità”, per valutare la progettazione e l'attuazione dei programmi. I dati sono stati raccolti attraverso interviste con il personale dei progetti e i beneficiari.

I risultati mostrano che l'integrazione dell'intersezionalità dipendeva in larga misura dalla consapevolezza e dall'esperienza sul campo degli attori dei progetti e non era incorporata nel quadro ufficiale del programma. Sebbene il programma prestasse attenzione ai contesti socio-economici, le dimensioni politiche e culturali venivano spesso trascurate. Concetti come l'empowerment femminile venivano interpretati in modo incoerente e talvolta ridotti a un ruolo economico ristretto, poiché l'intersezionalità era compresa solo in misura limitata e risultava assente dal nucleo del programma.

Questa ricerca mette in evidenza la necessità che i programmi dell'UE integrino sistematicamente i principi intersezionali, al fine di garantire interventi di sviluppo più inclusivi e sensibili al contesto.

Parole chiave: Intersezionalità, Programmi dell'Unione Europea, ENI CBC MED, Empowerment femminile, Programmi nella regione mediterranea.

Dedication

To my mother, Hanady Tahboub,

To my friend, Hadil Mahdi,

To all Palestinian women

The silent warriors who weave resistance

from patience and unyielding hope.

إلى والدتي هنادي طهوب،

إلى صديقتي هديل مهدي،

إلى جميع النساء الفلسطينيات،

المحاربات الصامتات،

اللواتي يغزلن من الصبر والأمل

مستقبلاً لا يعرف الانكسار.

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List of Acronyms

CCP	Control Contact Points
ENI CBC MED	The European Neighbourhood Instrument Cross Border Cooperation in the Mediterranean
EU	European Union
IBPA	Intersectional Approach Model for Policy & Social Change
JTS	Joint Technical Secretariat
JMC	Joint Monitoring Committee
MA	Managing Authority
NEET	Not in Employment, Education, or Training
PSC	Projects Selection Committee
SWANA	Southwest Asia and North Africa

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I developed an interest in exploring intersectionality in donor-funded programmes from a young age, when I first began volunteering in the world of Western donor-supported non-profit organisations. Of course, I was not yet familiar with the term ‘Intersectionality’, but I observed how the programmes were implemented and carried around an incomplete critique within that I could not yet articulate. Something was wrong, I said to myself. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but I started volunteering at a time when a flurry of projects offered gender workshops.

I still remember stories from women about some of the catastrophic interventions. In a workshop on gender and women’s rights in Hebron in the 2000s, the trainer - an experienced Palestinian feminist - explained the training material on how to help women get their rights. She encouraged them to stop doing household tasks and to refuse requests from their husbands regarding domestic duties. This speaker did not take into account the circumstances of the participants or the nature of their social lives and roles. All the participants were housewives with no university degree and no income-generating activities. They were married to men who did physically demanding work and provided well for the family. These couples shared family responsibilities in a traditional, clearly defined way. The man’s role was to provide for the livelihood, and the woman’s role was to run the household and raise the children. This system was convenient for these women who had no other skills and, in most cases, no desire to change their reality.

What happened after the workshop? The women felt small and socially oppressed. Some avoided taking part in similar workshops or training courses again. Others made fun of the speaker as a way of coping. One woman tried to put what she had learned into practice by refusing to cook or do the housework. When her husband came home, a heated argument broke out,

which ended with her being insulted and eventually having to apologise and make amends.

What happened here? The woman grew to dislike such programmes and so did her husband, their families and the women in the area, who now cautioned: "Don't participate in feminist NGO activities, they ruin homes. Feminists are evil. Feminists want to destroy families," and so on. This one workshop transformed a community that was neutral towards feminism - conservative, yes, but balanced within its social context - into a community that became vehemently anti-feminist. And ironically, the backlash was especially intense among women who felt they needed to prove that they were not feminists.

I am in no way justifying abuse or glorifying traditional gender roles. I refer here to a lack of contextual understanding and the ultimate futility of such interventions. What real benefit is there in direct incitement if not to help women gain real skills that can improve their daily lives? Why did the speaker assume that there is only one right way for women to live? Why didn't she ask the women about their real needs? Why was the dialogue not interactive, a mutual exchange in which she could learn from the women and they from her? Why did she stick to a pre-formulated speech, in a language that was completely detached from the local knowledge of these women, as if their knowledge was inferior and they needed to be instructed and corrected?

I could not get these questions out of my mind, and I was saddened by the wasted time and resources and the missed opportunity to make real, positive changes in these women's lives. I cannot say that these types of incidents were extremely widespread, but they did happen. And sometimes in less extreme cases, women took part in training that didn't have much to do with the reality of their lives. It didn't give them many useful skills and or a

way to support their financial independence, improve their social conditions or enable their political participation.

Over time, people in my country began to realise that there was an inescapable broader policy aimed at stripping the essence out of all these interventions and reprogramming them to create a depoliticised atmosphere that suited the post-Oslo political climate. Gender programmes, in particular, were redirected from their historic role of linking women's empowerment to resistance and liberation, and reframed around apolitical themes such as entrepreneurship, microfinance, and family awareness. This shift aligned with donor agendas that sought to present Palestine as a development project rather than a site of ongoing colonial struggle.

Meanwhile, I watched my mother, who was a feminist to the core - I think I inherited that from her - and who had an incredible ability to support women with unwavering faith and sincerity. She never labelled herself a feminist, but she acted in a very influential way. Her support for every woman was spontaneous and graceful, completely in tune with the context and an instinctive understanding of power dynamics. She grasped the social, economic and historical context of each woman and analysed the layers of oppression or privilege she could lean on to improve her social position, then her cultural and economic conditions and finally the well-being of her family.

I have always been amazed at my mother's ability to develop creative ways to help other women find solutions that truly empower them. With my mother's awareness of the importance of resilience as a tool to make a difference. I always felt that my mother was right- and that her spontaneous interventions were more real and effective than programmes funded with hundreds of thousands of dollars, if not more.

Later in my life, I spent a decade working on donor-funded projects aimed at developing local communities, including gender-focused programmes. During this time, I came to understand how disconnected these initiatives often are from the real needs of local communities. I witnessed large sums of money allocated without generating meaningful change on the ground, resources directed mainly towards salaries, administrative expenses, and donor-designed activities that lacked grounding in the cultural, social, or political realities of the communities they were intended to serve. Many of these projects, particularly those focused on gender equality, targeted narrow groups of beneficiaries who were not necessarily the most marginalised. They were privileged enough to access and communicate with donors. As a result, individuals with multiple and intersecting forms of oppression were systematically excluded, with no meaningful interventions to address their circumstances or improve their quality of life.

In 2020 during my Erasmus Master's in Global Development and Foresight, specialising in Global Development Policies, I was introduced to the concepts of *intersectionality* and *situated knowledge*. I had finally found the precise terminology to articulate something I had long observed but could not name: the way my mother had always embodied the capacity to navigate multiple, intersecting structures of identity and power. She lived these dynamics intuitively, without framing them in academic language. These concepts gave me a lens to both understand and honour her lived wisdom.

In the wider Mediterranean region, where women's lives are similarly shaped by overlapping and intersecting realities. Drawing on my ten years of experience working with donor-funded programmes in the area, I became increasingly aware that projects designed in the name of "*development*" often fail to address these layered dynamics, instead focusing narrowly on isolated categories. This awareness motivated me to explore the presence of

intersectionality in Mediterranean programmes, guided by the belief that women across the region share more than cultural elements such as food, wine, or olive oil; we share histories of resilience, struggles against patriarchy, and the complexities of living in diverse yet interconnected societies.

I chose to focus on EU-funded programmes because the European Union is one of the most influential donors in the Mediterranean. Verloo notes that European Union (EU) programmes explicitly prioritise gender equality, social justice, and inclusive development (2007). Within this context, the European Neighbourhood Instrument Cross Border Cooperation in the Mediterranean (ENI CBC MED) Programme stands out as a particularly relevant case study.

The ENI CBC MED Programme provides an ideal case for studying intersectionality in the EU as it operates at the intersection of extensive geographic, cultural, and institutional diversity, spanning thirteen Mediterranean countries with over 198 million inhabitants and encompassing significant variations in political systems, languages, religions, and social structures. Its decentralised governance, managed from Sardinia rather than Brussels, uniquely positions it to reflect Mediterranean realities while testing how EU frameworks adapt beyond centralised models. The programme's broad thematic scope, ranging from business development and innovation to social inclusion, poverty reduction, and environmental challenges, is fertile ground to examine how intersecting identities are, or are not, integrated across multiple development sectors. Notably, its explicit focus on marginalised groups such as women and NEETs (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) highlights the programme's potential to address power imbalances, while its complex multi-level governance structure creates a dynamic field for analysing how decision-making, representation, and local participation interact. By working in a region marked by shared structural challenges such as unemployment,

migration, and climate crises, but also deep political and socio-economic differences, ENI CBC MED becomes a critical site for evaluating whether EU-funded cooperation programmes can move beyond tokenistic inclusion and meaningfully operationalise intersectionality in practice. (Specific details will be mentioned in Chapter 3, Section 3.3.)

The programme also tests Donna Haraway's concept of situated knowledge: the idea that all knowledge is shaped by specific positions, identities, and power relations. Haraway (1988) contends that objectivity is achieved not through detachment but by acknowledging our own limits, perspectives, and responsibilities. This perspective prompts us to question how policies formulated far from the lived realities of Southern partner countries are translated into local contexts, where categories such as "women" or "youth" are often treated as homogeneous blocs, obscuring intersections of class, geography, and political realities. Furthermore, the programme's multilateral structure raises critical questions about knowledge transfer: is North–South cooperation genuinely co-productive or does it continue to reproduce hierarchical models in which development knowledge flows unidirectionally from the European centre to the Mediterranean periphery? In postcolonial and colonised contexts such as Palestine, these dynamics highlight enduring tensions between donor-driven, standardised frameworks and knowledge rooted in lived experience and socio-political complexity.

Moreover, the programme provides a vantage point to critically examine the reproduction of neoliberal development discourse. By foregrounding entrepreneurship, innovation, and economic growth as universal solutions to poverty and marginalisation, it risks depoliticising structural issues such as occupation, settler colonialism, or systemic inequality. This critique aligns with feminist theorists such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2006) and Chela Sandoval (2008), who argue that women in the Global South are often

positioned not as political actors with critical agency but as passive victims or beneficiaries within donor narratives. In this light, the ENI CBC MED Programme becomes a tool for analysing how development discourses construct target groups and whether these constructions truly enable empowerment or merely reinforce the figure of the “oppressed other” through soft rhetoric that obscures entrenched power asymmetries.

Ultimately, this research does not assess the programme in terms of its “success” or “failure”. Instead, it treats ENI CBC MED as a window into the discursive and administrative structures underpinning the EU’s approach to develop the Mediterranean. By analysing how intersectionality is acknowledged, framed, or erased in official documents and practices, the programme serves as a critical tool for understanding how privilege, power, and inequality are reproduced within a model presented as inclusive, cooperative, and just.

Before analysing how intersectionality is addressed in the ENI CBC MED Programme, it is important first to trace its evolution within the European Union, highlighting how the concept has been considered over time.

The Intersectionality in the European Union

Equity (specifically Gender equality) is often presented in EU policies as a unified, coherent global goal. However, scholars and advocates have long debated what this means and what it might entail. They have warned that setting a single European standard for equality could lead to the needs and experiences of marginalised groups being neglected. Which raises important questions, such as:

- What does gender equality actually mean in different contexts?

- Is the aim to achieve complete equality, to emphasise difference or to celebrate diversity?
- And how can policymakers tackle intersecting inequalities?

Although awareness of intersectionality is growing, EU equality policy still largely follows a one-dimensional approach that considers gender as a separate category without linking it to race, class or other social factors (Squires, 2005; Woodward, 2005). A brief look at how gender and intersectionality are integrated into EU mechanisms reveals the following:

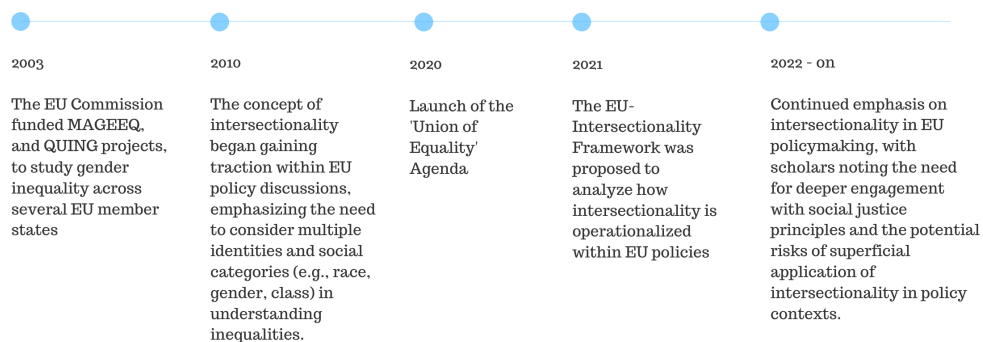


Figure 1: Timeline of Intersectionality in the EU

Early 2000s: Initial Research and Frameworks

2005-2003 The MAGEEQ project:

Between 2003 and 2005, the European Union carried out the MAGEEQ (Mainstreaming Gender Equality in Europe) project. Funded by the European Commission, it analysed how the concept of gender equality is addressed in texts and policies at national and EU level (Bacch 2005, p. 222). The project was based on a comparative analysis between EU countries, which showed that the concept of gender is not uniformly understood or applied across

Europe (Bacchi, 2005, p. 223). While some policies focused on legal and human rights equality between women and men, others focussed on gender differences or broader social diversity. The results of the project findings highlighted that "gender equality" is not a static concept, but rather an area with multiple interpretations and applications (Jalušič, 2009, p. 64). making it difficult to formulate unified European policies that reflects the specificities of different national contexts.

2006 – 2011 The QUING project:

Between 2006 and 2011, the QUING (Quality in Gender+ Equality Policies) project, funded by the European Commission, reviewed the quality of equality policies in Europe. The aim of the project was not only to track how "gender equality" was defined, but also to assess the quality of these policies and the extent to which they encompassed other dimensions such as race, class, age, and disability (QUING, n.d.). QUING relied on an in-depth analysis of texts, discourses and policies in European countries and showed that equality is often dealt with in a fragmented or superficial way, limiting its effectiveness (QUING, n.d.). The project emphasised that the development of effective equality policies required the integration of an intersectional approach that accounted for the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination faced by marginalised groups (Verloo, Walby, Armstrong, & Strid, 2009, p. 13)

2010s: Growing Recognition of Intersectionality

In 2010s, there was a shift in EU policy towards an intersectionality. Policy makers began to recognize that gender alone is not sufficient to explain different forms of discrimination and that it is necessary to consider multiple factors such as race, social class, disability, age and geographical location simultaneously. (Maes & Debusscher, 2024). Formal attention to this concept

began to appear in official European documents and reports. The concept of intersectionality has become an important framework for understanding multidimensional inequalities (Maes & Debusscher, 2024). For example, initiatives such as the Strategic Commitment to Gender Equality 2010–2015 focused on policy inclusivity and the consideration of inequalities between women and men, as well as other marginalised groups (European Commission, 2010).

At the same time, previous research projects such as MAGEEQ and QUING have influenced the European debate on how intersectionality can be applied in practice. Universities and research centres have begun to explore the challenges and gaps between theory and practice. Gender equality is now understood as a complex system in which gender intersects with numerous social factors. This shift has influenced more inclusive and flexible policies that are better responsive to the needs of different groups.

Some European Union programmes have also begun to integrate an intersectional perspective into practice. For example, programmes such as Horizon 2020 and the European Social Fund have encouraged projects that consider the intersection of gender with race, class and ability (European Commission, 2024). Labour market policies and initiatives to combat violence against women have also begun to consider women from marginalised backgrounds, such as migrant women or women with disabilities, to ensure tailored support and services. In addition, new indicators and metrics have been developed to evaluate policies that take multiple identities into account, and academic workshops and conferences have been organised to educate decision-makers about the importance of this approach.

2020: Launch of the 'Union of Equality' Agenda

In March 2020, the European Commission launched the "Uniting for Equality" initiative, explicitly committing to an intersectional approach across policy areas. This marked a major shift in EU gender equality policy, moving from the traditional understanding of gender equality to an approach that integrates intersectionality as a principle for implementation (European Commission, 2020). Several key strategies have been put forward as part of the "Uniting for Equality" agenda:

- Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025: the first communication published under the agenda focused on achieving gender equality across the EU.
- EU Action Plan Against Racism 2020–2025: This plan aimed to combat racism and promote equality for racial and ethnic minorities.
- EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion, and Participation 2020–2030: This framework focused on improving the situation of Roma communities in Europe.
- LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020–2025: This strategy aims to promote equality for LGBTIQ people across the EU.
- Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030: This strategy aimed to improve the rights and inclusion of people with disabilities.

2021 and Beyond: Ongoing Developments

2021: The EU Intersectionality Framework was proposed to analyse how intersectionality is operationalised in EU policies. This framework aims to assess the effectiveness of the 'Union of Equality' strategies and to ensure that intersectionality is not just a rhetorical commitment but is integrated into policy practice.

2022: The focus on intersectionality in European policy continued, with a deeper commitment to social justice principles in the application of this concept, and acknowledgment of the risk that the concept is only applied superficially or formally without actually integrating it into the design and implementation of programmes and policies.

Critics have noted (Verloo & Lombardo, 2007) that, while the EU's gender mainstreaming approach is more nuanced, it still fails to address deeper structural inequalities and instead focuses on superficial inclusion. For example, the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 promoted gender equality in areas such as employment, education and health, but does not address how gender inequality relates to other forms of inequality. This narrow focus can lead to policies that are ineffective or even harmful, as they do not consider the complex realities of people experiencing multiple forms of oppression.

This leads to the question of the extent to which intersectionality is integrated into EU programmes. Do they truly improve the complex reality of people suffering from multiple forms of oppression in local communities? Or is it merely a buzzword used by the EU without being put into practice?

Research Questions and Hypotheses

This research aims to critically examine how the principles of intersectionality are integrated (or neglected) in the framework of the ENI CBC MED programme. The research examines the underlying knowledge systems, intersectional principles and gendered narratives embedded in the design and implementation of the programme, particularly in relation to the empowerment of women and marginalised voices in the Mediterranean context.

Main Research Question:

How do European Union programmes take intersectionality into account, using ENI CBC MED as a case study?

Sub-questions:

1. How did the ENI CBC MED Programme reflect the tension between donor knowledge and situated knowledge?
2. To what extent were the principles of intersectionality incorporated into the programme's framework and practices?
3. How was the concept of women's empowerment defined and operationalised within the programme?

Main Hypothesis:

The ENI CBC MED Programme inadequately incorporates intersectionality to reflect the complexities of gender and social inequalities in the Mediterranean region.

Sub-Hypotheses:

1. The programme prioritises donor knowledge over situated knowledge, resulting in the marginalisation of local voices and context-specific expertise in the design and implementation of development projects.
2. Intersectionality is inconsistently applied in the ENI CBC MED Programme, with limited attention given to the overlapping and compounding forms of oppression experienced by marginalised groups.
3. The concept of women's empowerment within the programme is primarily defined through a neoliberal lens, focusing on economic participation and entrepreneurship rather than structural change or political agency.

Research Aim and Objectives

This research aims to critically examine how the concept of intersectionality is considered and operationalised within the ENI CBC MED Programme, with particular focus on the representation of women's empowerment. By analysing the interplay between donor-driven knowledge and locally situated knowledge, the research seeks to reveal how gendered and intersectional approaches are incorporated, marginalised, or contested in the planning and implementation of development projects funded under this programme.

Moreover, the research examines how the following principles of intersectionality are addressed: Intersecting Categories, Multilevel Analysis, Reflexivity, Time and Space, Diversity of Knowledge, Power, Equity, Resistance and Resilience, and Social Justice. The definitions of these principles are based on Hankivsky's *Intersectionality 101*, described in detail in Chapter Two. These intersectionality principles provide a framework for analysing how the European Union plans, designs, and implements its programmes with reference to the target groups' social, political, economic, and situational contexts, by understanding the effects of its interventions across different levels of society. This is formulated in the main research question: How do European Union development programmes take intersectionality into account, using ENI CBC MED as a case study?

The objectives of this research are to examine how the ENI CBC MED Programme incorporates intersectionality into its projects and to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme's multilevel analysis (macro, intermediate, micro) in addressing inequality and promoting inclusivity and sustainability. Furthermore, it aims to analyse how the ENI CBC MED Programme incorporates reflexivity to critically examine and improve its practices in

response to intersectional dynamics, and to investigate how the programme acknowledges and addresses the principles of Power, Time and Space, Social Justice, Equity, and Resistance and Resilience in its initiatives.

Research Objectives:

1. To explore the extent to which intersectionality is integrated into the ENI CBC MED Programme's strategic frameworks, project designs, and implementation mechanisms.
2. To analyse how the concept of women's empowerment is defined and interpreted within the programme, and whether these definitions reflect intersectional realities.
3. To examine the influence of donor knowledge versus situated knowledge in shaping gender-related priorities and project interventions.
4. To assess the implications of the programme's design on the inclusion (or exclusion) of marginalised groups, particularly women facing multiple layers of discrimination.
5. To contribute to broader theoretical and policy debates on intersectionality, feminist development, and knowledge production in cross-border cooperation programmes in the Global South.

Research Overview

This chapter has provided an overview of the basic concepts and theoretical foundations of the research, focusing on the concept of intersectionality and its various and contested uses within EU policies and development programmes. It also outlines the research gaps, questions and objectives and explains the rationale behind the decision to examine how

intersectionality approaches are applied in development programmes on the ground.

The next chapter introduces the theoretical framework and provides a critical analysis of the intersection of women's empowerment with donor programmes and NGO agendas, focusing on "white feminism" and its role in shaping social and economic structures. It also discusses the difference between local knowledge and donor-imposed knowledge and provides the conceptual tools necessary to analyse the impact of development programmes in practice.

The research methodology is presented in Chapter Three, which explains the research design and why the ENI CBC MED programme was selected as a case study. It also describes the target population and sample, the data collection tools and methods used to analyse the data, as well as ethical considerations and the limitations of the research.

The results of the interviews with the project staff are presented in chapters four to six. Chapter Four focuses on understanding the local context. This chapter highlights the local Mediterranean context from a political, economic and social perspective and its impact on the implementation of development programmes and women's empowerment initiatives and provides a deeper understanding of the environment in which the programmes are implemented. Chapter five explores how intersectional principles such as power, reflexivity, social justice and equity are conceptualised and applied as a framework for understanding and analysing the outcomes of development programmes. Chapter Six analyses the balance between donor priorities and the needs of local communities, highlighting the challenges, power dynamics and beneficiary perspectives on programme performance. Chapter Seven presents the results of the interviews with beneficiaries and compares the findings of project staff and beneficiaries.

Finally, Chapter Eight summarises the findings, discusses their theoretical and practical implications, and provides Policy Recommendations for the better integration of the intersectional approach in EU-funded development programmes.

CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, over the past three decades, numerous funded programmes in Palestine have been designed and implemented primarily from the perspective of international donors, reflecting their priorities and assumptions rather than the realities and needs of local communities. This donor-centred approach has often resulted in limited community engagement and a superficial understanding of local contexts. Among the areas most affected by this imbalance are initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.

Manal A. Jamal's analysis in *Western Donor Assistance and Gender Empowerment in the Palestinian Territories and Beyond* (2015) further illustrates how such donor frameworks have fragmented and weakened the Palestinian women's movement. The influx of Western aid in the post-Madrid and post-Oslo period, combined with externally defined models of empowerment, shifted the focus away from grassroots political mobilisation towards depoliticised service provision. As Jamal notes, many activists were transformed from engaged political participants into passive recipients of training and awareness programmes, leading to a dilution of feminist agency and autonomy.

This donor-driven dynamic has also contributed to a broader social backlash. As Adelman and Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2003) observes, the imposition of externally designed gender initiatives, without genuine consultation or participation, has fostered widespread mistrust towards gender-related organisations in Palestine, particularly among marginalised communities. This resistance is not simply a rejection of gender equality but a response to interventions perceived as alien to local realities and detached from everyday struggles.

Many of these programmes follow what has been termed a trickle-down feminism model, a framework that assumes solutions developed by upper- or middle-class individuals, often from Western backgrounds, can be universally applied. These interventions tend to overlook the cultural, social, and economic specificities of the communities they aim to serve, imposing externally constructed models of empowerment. As a result, instead of producing meaningful transformation, such top-down approaches often generate unintended consequences that reinforce, rather than challenge, existing hierarchies.

As Rafia Zakaria argues in “*Against White Feminism*” (2021), trickle-down feminism should not be confused with intersectional feminism but rather understood as a form of “*Dictatorial Feminism*”. While intersectional feminism acknowledges that women’s experiences of oppression are shaped by intersecting factors such as race, class, and culture, the trickle-down model applies a one-size-fits-all narrative that flattens these differences. It assumes that women in the Global South merely need to replicate Western women’s trajectories towards liberation, portraying them as passive, pre-modern subjects in need of rescue and guidance.

The persistent failure of such development efforts can be traced to the absence of an intersectional perspective. Intersectionality provides a framework for understanding how systems of inequality, based on gender, race, ethnicity, class, disability, sexuality, and other forms of discrimination, interact to shape lived experiences. As Etherington et al. (2020) notes, recognising these intersections is vital for designing programmes that genuinely address the diverse and overlapping barriers individuals face. Without such an approach, development initiatives risk oversimplifying complex realities and reproducing the very inequalities they seek to eliminate.

This chapter examines the interconnected dynamics of NGO-ised women's empowerment, development, and feminism, highlighting how white feminism has often served as a tool for social re-engineering and the perpetuation of capitalist ideology. It critically explores intersectionality as an analytical framework for understanding the overlapping structures of power that shape women's lives and assesses how donor-driven approaches often obscure these complexities. The discussion contrasts situated knowledge, rooted in local experiences and contexts, with donor knowledge. In doing so, the chapter addresses key research gaps by examining how development discourse perpetuates hierarchies of knowledge and power, while proposing alternative, context-sensitive pathways towards genuine empowerment.

Situated Knowledge vs. Donor Knowledge

Zakaria (2021) was not the only critic of "*Dictatorial Feminism*", in which solutions are imposed from above without the active participation of those directly affected, as a form of epistemic hegemony. Many feminists advocating for a "*Third Wave*" of feminism have emphasised the importance of "*Situated Knowledge*", defined as knowledge in its various forms, including scientific knowledge, that is influenced by the material, social, and cultural contexts in which it is produced (Science Direct, 2024). They have highlighted the need to challenge the hegemony of Western knowledge and resist hierarchies that privilege certain forms of knowledge over others, often ignoring the indigenous knowledge of non-Western societies (Sharma, 2021).

The recognition of situated knowledge as a challenge to the Western scientific method has significant implications for how knowledge is produced, legitimised, and mobilised in feminism, development, and social justice more broadly (Haraway, 1988). A turn towards epistemic pluralism enhances the

ability to develop a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of complex social, environmental, and political issues (Omodan, 2024) and underscores the need to promote the dehegemonisation of knowledge produced by privileged elites and to recognise the capacity of people from diverse backgrounds to be subjects. As the ideological environment is shaped by existing power relations, it reflects the ideas, views, interests, and behaviour of dominant groups and nations, often through local elites and urban centres (Fasheh, 1990).

In contrast to situated knowledge is donor knowledge, which is often imposed by donors and international development organisations. This results in less priority being given to the knowledge and perspectives of groups that differ from the donors' own sources of knowledge. Modern development discourse, with its Western epistemological framework, marginalises and displaces local and indigenous knowledge systems.

For example, EU funding programmes for gender equality and women's empowerment have been criticised for privileging dominant Western forms of knowledge and expertise over local, situated, and context-dependent understandings of gender and development (Jamal, 2015). These programmes often fail to meaningfully engage with the diverse perspectives and forms of knowledge of the global South, local communities, and marginalised groups, instead imposing a top-down global approach that undermines local agency and perpetuates academic imperialism (Pinnington et al., 2024). This lack of epistemic diversity has limited the transformative potential of these funding initiatives and highlights the need for a more inclusive and decentralised approach to knowledge production and mobilisation in feminism, development, and social justice.

In the Mediterranean, for example, a critique of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development shows how adherence to a feminist and neoliberal

framework can hinder gender equality and a better life for women on the ground (Struckmann, 2018). This analysis underscores the importance of adopting a postcolonial feminist perspective that attends to local issues of agency and voice, rather than imposing a universal approach to women's empowerment. Through a more inclusive and context-sensitive approach to knowledge production, it is possible to dismantle the academic imperialism that has long characterised Western feminist scholarship and development practice, and to create more equitable and transformative ways of understanding and engaging with the world (Mohanty, 1988). This raises the question of how the concept of women's empowerment has been defined and how it has evolved over time, particularly as it became integrated into development discourse.

NGO-ised Women Empowerment, Development and Feminism:

Historically, women worldwide have faced numerous barriers to social and political participation and have had limited access to resources such as education, healthcare, and economic opportunities (Gautam, 2020). The term "women's empowerment" originally had a very different meaning from its current usage. In the early 1980s, the Global South group DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era) and Indian feminist Geeta Sen helped to develop the term (Zakaria, 2021).

DAWN opposed the imposition of Western feminist ideals and advocated for grassroots women's empowerment to give a voice to women from post-colonial countries (DAWN, 2024). Their focus was on political mobilisation and education without discrimination based on nationality, gender, class, or ethnicity, with an emphasis on collective political power.

Despite initial rejection, their concepts gained recognition in the mid-1990s (Zakaria, 2021).

Originally, the “*Empowerment Approach*” focused on a “*Bottom-Up*” strategy. The term was intended to highlight grassroots organisations driving the necessary structural changes so that collective action and resistance could be encouraged and mobilised to bring about change. Later, the term “*Empowerment*” gained considerable popularity among NGOs in the Global South from the 1980s onwards (Batliwala, 2007). Empowerment has become a catchword used by donors and NGOs to support their own agendas without challenging the patriarchal structures and power dynamics that maintain women’s subordination (Cornwall & Brock, 2005). International development actors have focused on individualistic approaches to women's empowerment, which has undermined collective action and broader social change. This is more in line with Western models of self-actualisation than the collective resistance and mobilisation that were central to the original concept of empowerment.

Many empowerment programmes have prioritised measurable outputs within monitoring and evaluation frameworks rather than engaging with the deeper, transformative processes required to challenge entrenched power structures. This focus has created a disconnect between the rhetoric of empowerment and women’s lived realities (Cornwall, 2016). Over time, the concept of ‘empowerment’ has lost much of its original political significance, becoming absorbed into top-down, donor-driven agendas that reinforce Western dominance and turn empowerment into a buzzword rather than a vehicle for transformation (Calvès, 2009). As NGOs became increasingly tied to donor priorities, their capacity to respond to the actual needs of local communities was often compromised.

While the stated objectives of such programmes include addressing gender imbalances and improving women's access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, scholars have shown that many of these initiatives fail to engage with the structural inequalities that sustain women's subordination (Raju, 2005). Instead, they rely on superficial interventions that leave the underlying social order intact. Viewing empowerment as a linear or universal process overlooks the fact that the barriers women face are embedded in complex historical, cultural, and political realities. Consequently, the widespread adoption of the empowerment discourse by development agencies raises critical questions about its true nature and impact.

Empowerment must therefore be understood as a multifaceted and context-dependent process rather than a fixed outcome. This research defines women's empowerment as a collective and transformative endeavour through which women challenge the structural, economic, political, and cultural dysfunctions that constrain their agency, ultimately fostering broader social change. A one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to yield sustainable results, as empowerment is inseparable from the specific contexts in which it unfolds (Panda, 2000).

White Feminism as A Tool for Social Re-Engineering and The Recycling of Capitalist Ideology:

Before discussing white feminism, it is essential to distinguish between "whiteness" and feminism. Feminism is a movement advocating gender equality and the rights of all, regardless of ethnicity or sexual orientation (Mayeri, 2011). Whiteness, by contrast, is a societal construct that positions whiteness as the norm or ideal, often marginalising other racial and ethnic groups (Lund, 2022). When combined, "white feminism" centres the

experiences, needs, and goals of middle-class white women, frequently overlooking the struggles and perspectives of women from other ethnicities (Liska, 2015).

White feminism is an ideology rather than a description of an individual; not all white women are white feminists, and not all white feminists are exclusively white. This framework assumes women's experiences are universal and that solutions aligned with white women's perspectives suffice for all (Zakaria, 2021). Its exclusionary tendencies often neglect women of colour, the LGBTQ+ community, and women in post-colonial contexts. For instance, while white women may face sexism in the workplace, women of colour often contend with intersecting forms of discrimination based on both gender and race, which white feminism tends to overlook (Brennan, 2019).

A notable example is the Western fight for abortion rights, which has prioritised the choice not to bear children without equally addressing the reproductive challenges women in other parts of the world face, such as poverty or restrictive state policies like China's former one-child rule. This illustrates how a singular focus on a Western context can obscure the complex realities of reproductive rights elsewhere (Brennan, 2019).

In the Mediterranean, white feminism is deeply intertwined with colonial history and migration. Historically, Western feminist narratives have often depicted Western women as symbols of modernity and liberation, implicitly positioning local women in the Global South as needing "rescue" from their cultures (Mohanty, 1998; Jeffrey & Rumens, 2020). European colonial powers, including France, Italy, and Spain, promoted this hierarchy by asserting cultural superiority, exploiting local economies, and framing post-colonial societies as backward (Ferro, 2005; Boehmer, 2017).

Consequently, local women are frequently represented as oppressed and in need of liberation according to Western standards, neglecting indigenous forms of agency and resistance (Boehmer, 2017). White feminist scholars have often reinforced neo-imperial narratives that portray women from the Global South as helpless victims or “exotic others” (Crawley, 2022). Men of colour are similarly essentialised as violent or oppressive, reinforcing the colonial trope that the liberation of women of colour lies in the hands of white men (Crawley, 2022).

White feminism’s failure to incorporate colonial histories and intersecting oppressions, political, economic, and cultural, limits its effectiveness, particularly in Southern Mediterranean countries (Beckson, 2020). In North Africa, feminist movements in Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria have historically combined gender equality with anti-colonial struggles, valuing cultural identity as central to their advocacy (Salhi & Bougherira, 2021). Yet, dominant European feminist narratives often marginalise these movements, promoting homogenised models of feminism that may conflict with local realities. For example, campaigns against the veil frequently misinterpret religious motivations and fail to consider the identity and faith of veiled women (Behiery, 2023; Wing & Smith, 2005).

White feminism similarly overlooks rural and migrant women in Europe, who face compounded challenges due to geography, ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic status (Buller, 2017; Anthias et al., 2012). Its focus on issues prioritised by middle-class white women, such as workplace equality or reproductive rights, neglects intersecting oppressions experienced by marginalised groups (Anthias et al., 2012). Comprehensive feminist discourse must therefore engage with systemic inequalities, including discriminatory immigration policies and labour market barriers, to ensure meaningful inclusion.

A further critique is white feminism's alignment with neoliberal values, emphasising individual empowerment over collective action (Schuster, 2016; Nash, 1997). While appealing to women who already benefit from societal privilege, this approach fails to address structural inequalities affecting marginalised women (Kendall, 2020). By equating empowerment with economic participation, white feminism promotes market-driven solutions, encouraging entrepreneurship and workforce integration, without addressing barriers such as unpaid care work, unequal access to education, or systemic violence (Bennett, 2024; Federici, 2018).

This narrow focus reduces empowerment to measurable economic outcomes, often overlooking whether these gains transform power dynamics or enhance overall well-being. For example, women working long hours for minimal pay in garment industries should not be considered empowered merely because they participate in the workforce (Habib, 2014). In the Mediterranean, development initiatives that prioritise entrepreneurship or microfinance may create economic opportunities but fail to address patriarchal legal structures, gender-based violence, or social inequities (Bennett, 2024).

White feminism also risks commodifying empowerment, presenting it as a purchasable or marketable product. This commercialised approach, often adopted by Western feminists, dilutes feminism's radical potential, framing it as an individual lifestyle choice rather than a movement for systemic change. In Mediterranean societies, where family and community solidarity are highly valued, promoting individualistic solutions can conflict with collective social norms and undermine traditional support systems.

Another significant critique is the “rescue mission” mentality, rooted in colonial thinking, where white feminists impose Western solutions on women from other cultures, disregarding local knowledge and agency (Zakaria, 2022). Genuine solidarity, by contrast, requires mutual respect, active listening,

and culturally sensitive support tailored to the community's priorities. For example, addressing violence against women effectively may involve working with local leaders, providing psychosocial support, and respecting cultural contexts, rather than imposing Western models of legal intervention that isolate women from their communities.

Ultimately, imposing external solutions without recognising local contexts can provoke resistance and limit the sustainability of feminist initiatives. White feminism's influence in the Mediterranean is particularly evident in NGO and donor-led programmes, where Western agendas dominate, marginalising local voices and reinforcing power imbalances. Salary disparities between Western officials and local staff further perpetuate racial and economic inequalities (Bennett, 2024).

The intersection of white feminism, neoliberalism, and the development aid industry has reduced empowerment to a commodified product, measured by economic participation rather than genuine shifts in social or political power. While vocational training, business development, or access to financial services can provide resources, they do not necessarily transform structural inequalities or improve women's overall well-being.

There is an urgent need for a more inclusive and intersectional approach in the work and interventions of these organisations. The lack of intersectionality in the design and implementation of programmes and initiatives by donor agencies and NGOs is particularly problematic in the Mediterranean context, where identities and experiences are shaped by factors such as ethnicity, religion, class, and colonial history. This context requires interventions that are useful and relevant to local communities. The focus on gender as the primary axis of oppression often ignores the ways in which other forms of marginalisation shape women's lives. The narrow focus on economic

participation as the primary route to empowerment should be replaced by a broader agenda that incorporates social, political, and cultural change.

Intersectionality as an Analytical Tool

The term intersectionality first emerged with Kimberlé Crenshaw, who focused on exposing the legal injustices that result from ignoring intersectionality (woman + race). Crenshaw (1989) explained how she developed the concept of intersectionality while studying US anti-discrimination law, feminist theory and anti-racist politics. She argued that Black women experience oppression "at the intersection" of race and sex and that treating race and sex as separate categories erases their experiences. She described intersectionality as a way of capturing 'the multidimensionality of Black women's lived experiences' (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139).

She later expanded on this framework, arguing that intersectionality is not just about race and sex, but rather a lens through which different forms of power and oppression interact (Crenshaw 1991). According to her, intersectionality is a lens through which one can see where power enters and collides, where it intersects and intersects. This work has inspired many scholars to explore the topic of intersectionality, which has since expanded into numerous areas.

Patricia Hill Collins then began to connect the topic to larger systems of power (gender, race, class, religion) to understand the bigger picture. In her book, "*Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*" (1990), Collins began to develop a black feminist epistemology and show how African American women developed a critical worldview based on their experiences with racism, sexism, and classism. This worldview is not

only a reflection of oppression, but also a source of strength, empowerment and resistance. She also explained how the systems of oppression (racism, sexism, classism) intersect to create different sites of privilege or oppression within what she called the "matrix of domination".

Collins also emphasised the importance of black feminist knowledge, pointing out that black women have developed an alternative knowledge through lived experience, everyday life, art and community. They have a unique critical perspective on power structures. She also spoke about the importance of empowerment tools such as everyday resistance, discourse, art and community as a means of strengthening collective consciousness. Furthermore, she showed that knowledge is not only theoretical, but a means to liberate Black women and build solidarity between marginalised groups. This emphasises the value of personal and collective experience as an epistemological framework for knowledge production, which serves as an alternative to the centrality of White/Western knowledge in feminist studies.

Later, Collins explored the complicated relationships between social categories such as race, class, gender, sexuality and nationality and how these categories create a complex web of discrimination and disadvantage in society. and how violence affects people differently according to class, gender, nationality and ethnicity (Collins 2016). She broadened the focus from women of colour to other groups and presented intersectionality as a critical social theory that combines academic analysis with political action. She emphasised that intersectionality is not just a theory, but a tool for social change in different areas and a framework for analysing structures and institutions, not just individuals.

Ange-Marie Hancock (2007) developed intersectionality as a research paradigm applicable in the political and social sciences as a methodological approach for understanding the impact of policies on different groups. She

called for the development of clear criteria for the study of intersectionality, whether quantitative or qualitative. She criticised the superficial use of the term and pointed out that the interaction between one identity and another does not mean the multiplication of marginalising factors but rather creates new and complex experiences that cannot be understood by a simple summation. Overlapping experiences produce new phenomena that need to be analysed with specific tools.

Over the last three decades, the concept of intersectionality has gained considerable importance in feminist and political discourses. It has become an important analytical tool for understanding how social categories such as gender, race, class and sexuality interact to create systems of oppression and privilege, and that this is borne out in public policy, international development, and legal and frameworks. Intersectionality moves beyond the simplistic, binary logic of analysis that treats one form of inequality in isolation from others and uses the seemingly dominant form as a basis for comparison.

But what is the definition of intersectionality? Crenshaw defines intersectionality as

A lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It's not simply that there's a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times, that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things. (Crenshaw, 2017, para. 4)16/01/2026 07:37:00

Black American women are doubly marginalised because of their intersectional identity as both women and people of colour within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, the interests and experiences of

women of colour are frequently marginalised within both', (Crenshaw, 1991 p. 1244).

The Oxford Dictionary defines intersectionality as "The interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage; a theoretical approach based on such a premise." (Oxford English Dictionary, para. 1)

In this research, intersectionality is defined as a framework for understanding how different aspects of individual identity - including race, gender, social class and sexuality - interact to create unique experiences of privilege or oppression. (*Intersectionality | Definition, Kimberle Crenshaw, History, Applications, Criticism, & Facts | Britannica, 2025*)

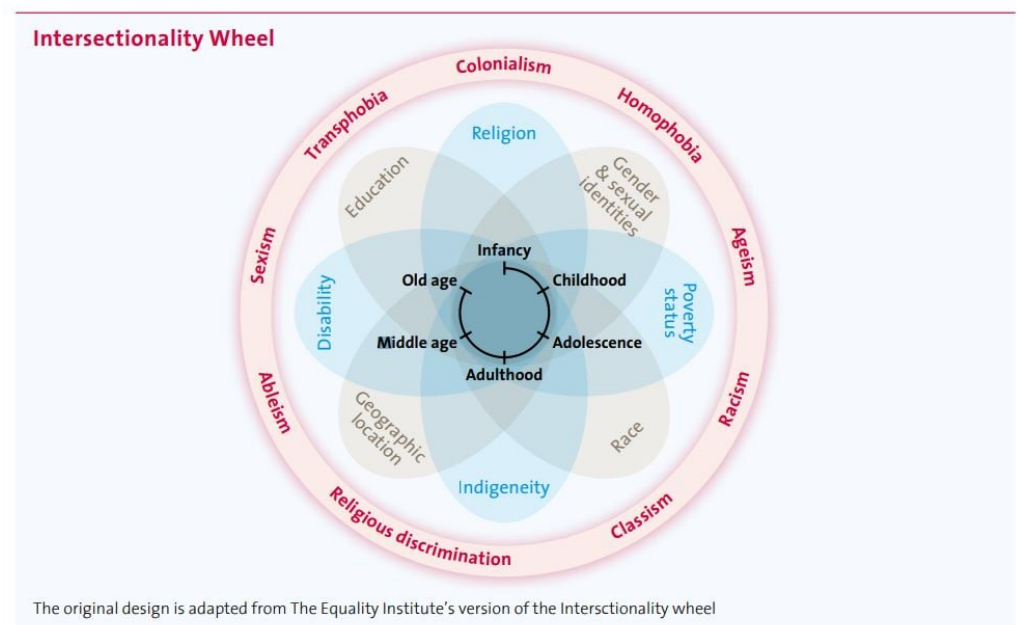


Figure 2: Intersectionality wheel

Crenshaw (1989) also demonstrates how race and gender interact in shaping structural and representational aspects. She distinguishes between three forms of intersectionality:

- Structural intersectionality: examines how different forms of oppression interact to shape the lived experiences of individuals.
- Political intersectionality: analyses the ways in which social justice movements and policies can marginalise certain groups. Political differences are particularly important because policies that address one axis of inequality are rarely neutral in relation to others.
- Representative intersectionality: examines how cultural narratives and stereotypes influence public perceptions and policy approaches

All these concepts are used as analytical tools to understand how aspects of an individual's social and political identity interact and how they lead to discrimination and privilege not only in relation to gender issues, but also in relation to the environment, economic empowerment, political participation, etc. (Davis, 2008).

As Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) note, 'Intersectionality has become a central framework for understanding and addressing inequality in a wide range of fields, from feminist theory to critical race studies to development studies' (787). The incorporation of an intersectional analysis reduces the likelihood that important information about the inequitable effects of policies and actions will be overlooked (Hankivsky, 2014). This opens up new research and policy approaches to understand the connections between the structures that characterise different population groups by providing new and more comprehensive information to better understand the origins, causes and characteristics of social problems (Hankivsky, 2014). Hancock describes intersectionality as 'the best chance for an effective diagnosis and ultimately an effective prescription' (2007, p. 73).

It also helps to enable more effective and efficient responses than a "one size fits all" approach, which ignores the real needs of the most marginalised groups and exacerbates social inequality (Verloo, 2006). The absence of intersectionality in programme design often produces a homogenised notion of "womanhood" (Collins & Bilge, 2020). This approach assumes that all women face the same challenges, failing to capture the diversity of social realities. For example, programmes aimed at increasing women's economic participation, such as microfinance or entrepreneurship initiatives, may benefit women who already possess some social or financial capital, while ignoring the structural barriers faced by women with disabilities, ethnic minorities, or those living in conflict-affected areas (Sorensen, 1998).

In Mediterranean contexts, additional factors such as religion and migration significantly shape women's experiences of exclusion in countries like France, Italy, and Spain (Fokkema & De Haas, 2015). Efforts to include women of colour, particularly from Muslim and immigrant communities, have often fallen short, as programmes fail to fully account for intersecting social, cultural, and economic dimensions (Wing & Smith, 2005). Development initiatives may also falter when they adopt preconceptions about gender roles without engaging with the local context. For instance, programmes that aim to promote girls' education without considering social norms or family expectations may provoke resistance, inadvertently reinforcing traditional practices rather than challenging them (Gupta et al., 2020).

Without an intersectional lens, interventions struggle to address nuanced cultural dynamics or engage community leaders meaningfully. This limitation not only diminishes programme effectiveness but also undermines collective action. Empowering only the least marginalised women while neglecting the most vulnerable fragments of social movements, weakens solidarity, and reduces the potential for systemic change (UN Women, 2022).

Despite the widespread use of the concept of intersectionality in academic studies and activism, its application in public policy faces major challenges.

1. Unclear as a model

It has been criticised for being unclear as a model for understanding social structures (Beisel & Kay, 2005). Most studies focus on the different experiences of different groups of women without identifying when and where certain intersections are more important than others. Proposed solutions include legal mechanisms that recognise differences based on an intersectional perspective (Young, 1990) or engaging in democratic debates between different social groups to bring their experiences and views onto the public agenda, as Squires (2005, p. 382) suggests. However, this approach risks promoting identity politics that could undermine solidarity between different groups and lead to restrictions within these groups.

2. Erratic efforts to canvas marginalised groups and add their perspective in studies

As policymakers and development officials have realised the importance of an intersectional perspective on injustice and discrimination, it has also become evident that the knowledge and experiences of marginalised people are often overlooked in decision-making. Young notes that the knowledge and experiences of marginalised groups offer valuable insights into how different forms of inequality intersect and interact (Young, 1990). When policymakers include them, policies are more realistic and responsive to the real needs of these people.

3. Difficult to include principles

Although many policy makers recognise the importance of tackling multiple inequalities, progress in translating intersectionality principles into concrete policies beyond anti-discrimination legislation has been limited (Ferlo, 2006; Bell, 2004; Verloo, 2006).

Furthermore, policy makers face the problem that there is no clear and uniform definition of intersectionality, which makes the development of effective policies that meet the needs of marginalised groups a major challenge (Beisel & Kay, 2005). Simplifying complex social realities often leads to a binary approach that focuses exclusively on differences between men and women and ignores how gender intersects with other forms of inequality, such as race, class and ability (Verloo, 2006). The political dimension of intersectionality is rarely considered, particularly in funded programmes, which can lead to interventions that reinforce existing power dynamics rather than challenge them (Sainsbury, 2003). This shows that the integration of intersectionality into policy requires a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of all social and political dimensions in order to ensure equity and inclusion for marginalised groups.

Fortunately, significant effort has produced useful tools and frameworks to integrate this approach into policy. One of the best known of these tools is the Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) framework developed by Hankivsky et al. (2012). This framework is practise-orientated and provides policy makers with a clear way to understand how different social categories (such as gender, race, class, age, ability, etc.) intersect.

The advantage of this framework is that it is based on extensive observations and experiences of researchers, academics and staff in government and community organisations. It emerged in response to policymakers overwhelmed by the multitude of "lenses" (gender, age,

disability, etc.). Rather than considering each factor individually, the IBPA's comprehensive approach links these factors into two main components:

- Twelve key questions (divided into descriptive and transformative) support the analytical process. (check figure 3)
- A set of guiding principles that help ensure that the analysis maintains the spirit of intersectionality. (check figure 4)

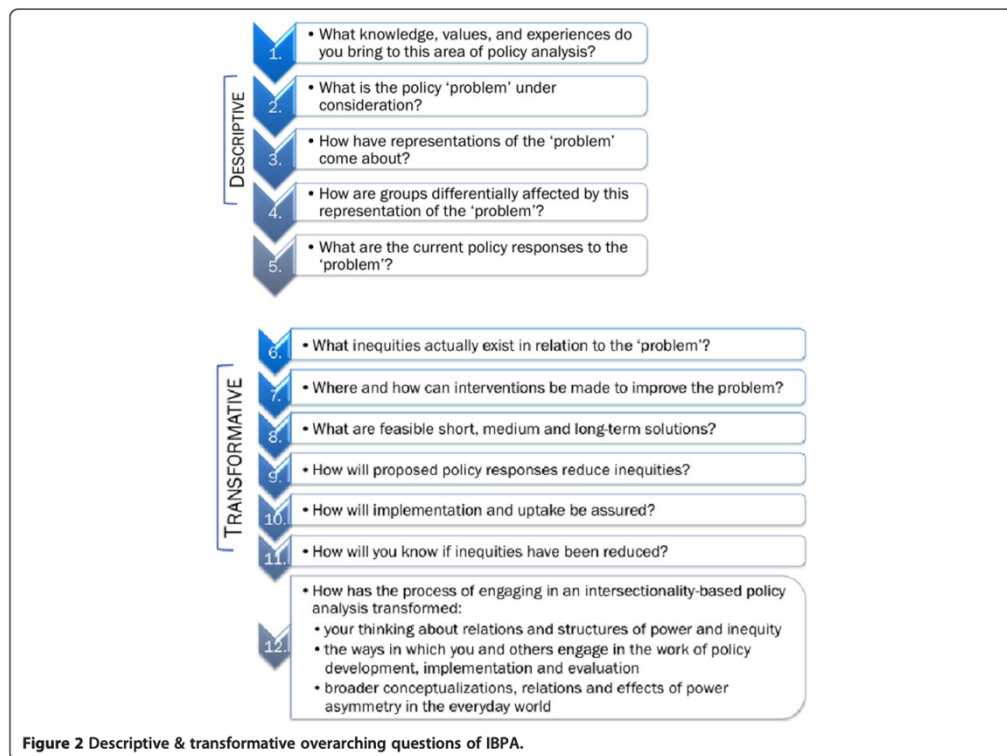


Figure 3: Descriptive & transformative overarching question of IBPA

The descriptive questions focus on understanding the problem in its full context: How is the problem originally defined? What assumptions does the government base its priorities on? Who are the people affected or targeted by the policy? These questions sometimes reveal hidden inequalities or privileges in existing policies. The transformative questions, on the other hand, encourage people to consider new alternatives and develop policy responses

that genuinely aim to change social structures, reduce inequalities and promote social justice.

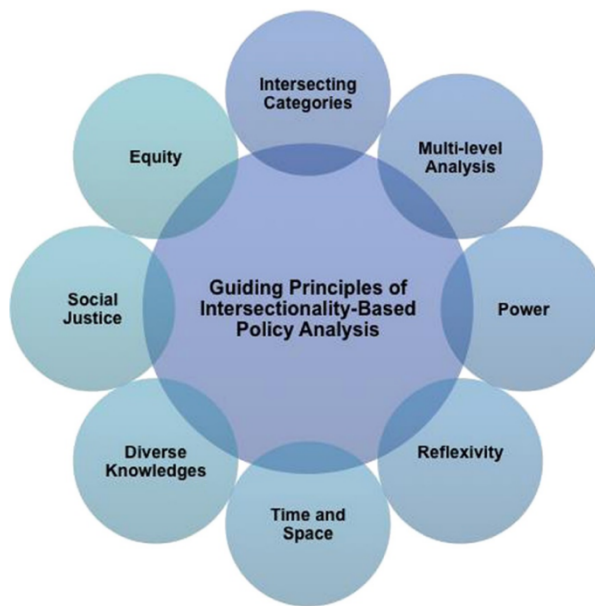


Figure 4 : Guiding principles of Intersectional Approach Model for Policy & Social Change (IBPA)

The Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) framework was chosen as a reference for this research.

This research approaches intersectionality by looking IBPA's twelve social categories: race, gender, sexuality, class, nationality, ability, language, religion, culture, ethnicity, body size and age. The framework was inspired by De Vries (2015), who depicts these categories as interconnected layers of a prism in which identities are analysed in both their subjective and structural dimensions (Atewologun, 2018). For the purposes of this research, sexuality and body size will not be analysed. Furthermore, gender will be limited to the

categories of male and female, as there is not enough data to capture other identities.

My research questions were conceptualised and analysed based on the intersectional principles outlined in this framework as follows:

1. Intersecting Categories

The intersectional perspective emphasises that people's lives cannot be understood by looking at only one aspect of their identity. No single social category, such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age or class, can fully explain a person's needs or experiences. Rather, intersectionality sees these categories as deeply interconnected. They shape and influence each other in ways that create unique experiences.

2. Multi-level Analysis

The principle of "multi-level analysis" is a fundamental pillar for understanding how differences and inequalities characterise the lives of individuals. Three interlinked levels are analysed: Macro level, such as global or national laws and policies, Meso/Intermediate level, such as large institutions or organisations, Micro level, such as local communities and individual experiences. These levels do not work in isolation but are in constant interaction and influence each other. Their importance is determined by careful research and an understanding of the local context. This principle was analysed through research interviews to determine the extent to which participants are aware of the impact of multiple levels in shaping reality and how these intersections can contribute to the creation of double oppression or, conversely, double opportunities, making individuals' experiences more complex and interwoven.

3. Power

"Power" is not limited to the social and political structures that govern societies, but also to the ideas and narratives that shape the consciousness of individuals and groups. This is because 'Power' excludes certain types of experiences, contributes to the formation of social categories through processes such as racial discrimination, and determines who enjoys privilege and who is marginalised, both between and within different groups. Power is a fluid and dynamic relationship, e.g. a person can enjoy privilege in one context and be oppressed in another, sometimes simultaneously. Power can be exercised over others or shared in the context of collective action and solidarity.

4. Reflexivity

Intersectionality not only deals with discrimination or injustice, but also requires constant self-reflection regarding these questions: Where do I stand? How do my background and experiences influence the way I see and interact with others? This kind of reflection helps to uncover hidden forms of power and privilege and opens the way for a deeper and fairer understanding.

5. Time and Space

The principle of time and place shows that people's experiences of privilege and marginalisation cannot be isolated from the contexts in which they live. The place they come from, and the historical moment profoundly shape the way they see the world, the meaning they give to events, and the way their relationships with others are constructed. Time and place are therefore not

just neutral backdrops, but rather active elements that shape the development of identity and inequality.

6. The Diversity of Knowledges

When we talk about intersectionality, one of the main concerns is how knowledge is produced, whose voices are included, and how power shapes this process. All too often, certain forms of knowledge are treated as more valuable than others, creating a hierarchy in which local knowledge is overlooked while institutional knowledge is seen as more legitimate. Intersectionality challenges this by asking us to include voices and experiences that are usually excluded. When the knowledge of marginalised communities is acknowledged, it can break through dominant narratives and pave the way for more equitable and inclusive policies.

7. Social Justice

Social justice is a fundamental concept in the intersectional perspective, as it is not only about the equitable distribution of resources among people, but also about changing the social relations and systems of power that create inequality. It is about tackling the deep-rooted causes of injustice and finding new ways of living and thinking that ensure human dignity and achieve environmental, social, and economic sustainability.

8. Equity

Equality is closely linked to social justice, especially when viewed through an intersectional lens. It is important to distinguish between equality and equity: equality means treating everyone the same, while equity goes further by addressing the structural barriers that prevent marginalised groups from accessing resources and opportunities on equal terms with more privileged groups.

9. Resilience and Resistance

Resilience and resistance are essential elements of work from an intersectional perspective, as they help us to understand how communities challenge and confront systems of power and oppression. Even in so-called "marginalised" places, we find that people do not simply accept reality, but resist the values, norms, and practices that constrain them. One of the strongest forms of resistance is collective action, where groups affected by oppression come together to change dominant ideas and create a different reality.

After all the above, only this model was chosen as a reference for this research because it covers the key aspects necessary to illustrate how the EU designs and implements its programmes using an intersectional perspective to understand the presence of intersectionality in the interventions funded by these programmes, including economic, social, technological and environmental interventions.

Addressing Research Gaps

Despite the significant expansion of feminist and research literature on the concept of intersectionality, most previous studies have focused on the theoretical analysis of intersectionality or on explaining how some social movements marginalise the experiences of certain groups of women. Meanwhile, research examining the presence of intersectionality in programmes funded by international donors remains sparse and scattered. In the context of European Union programmes, despite the continued emphasis on issues of gender equality and inclusive development, the extent to which the principles of intersectionality are integrated into the design and implementation of these programmes has yet to be explored, particularly in multicultural and multi-identity regions such as the Mediterranean. Therefore, it is important that this research fills this knowledge gap by analysing the ENI CBC MED programme as a case study to understand how the principles of intersectionality are integrated (or omitted) in the practice of the funded programmes and what impact this has on women's empowerment and the promotion of social justice in the region.

In order to clearly articulate this gap, it is first necessary to examine the evolution of feminist literature in relation to the concept of intersectionality: from the debate on women's representation and their differences, to the attempts to incorporate intersectionality into public policy, to the current discussions on the practical challenges of its implementation in funded programmes. This overview will allow us to understand where previous studies have left off and what questions remain unanswered, justifying the need for this current study.

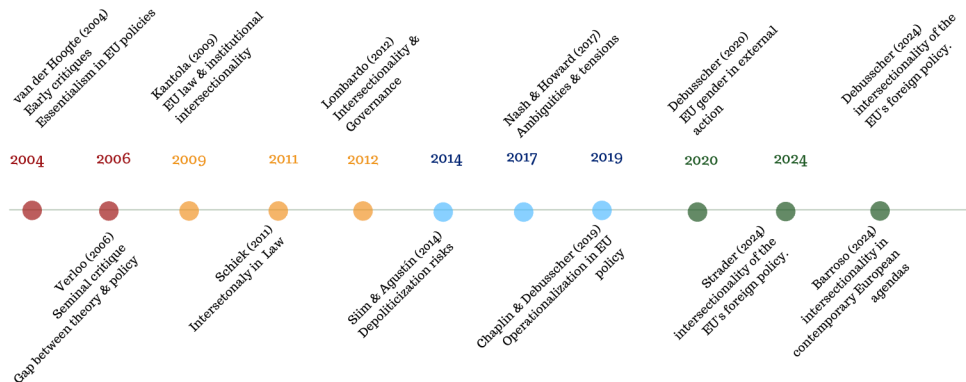


Figure 5: Timeline of Intersectionality in Policy Literature

Early critiques:

The early 2000s marked the beginning of critical debates about the limits of gender equality policy when viewed through the lens of intersectionality. One of the critiques relevant to intersectionality in policy discourse can be found in the work of van der Hoogte and Kingma (2004). Their study demonstrated how cultural discrimination and socio-economic exclusion are deeply intertwined, particularly for women belonging to indigenous or marginalised communities. They argued that these women are not only exposed to cultural marginalisation - such as the devaluation of their languages, traditions and social roles- but also to structural barriers that manifest themselves in poverty, limited access to education and fewer opportunities in the labour market.

The authors emphasise that the two dimensions are mutually reinforcing, as cultural marginalisation restricts access to economic and political resources and thus creates a continuous cycle of marginalisation. For development organisations and donor-funded programmes, the implication of this analysis is therefore clear: it is not enough to address cultural recognition in isolation from material needs, nor is it enough to promote economic

participation without recognising cultural identity. An effective policy must combine both dimensions.

In (2006), Verloo presented a ground-breaking analysis of the European Union's equality policy, in which she emphasises its limitations in combating the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. She points out that although the EU is formally committed to combating discrimination in the areas of gender, race, class, disability and sexual orientation, its policies often ignore the complexity of intersectionality. Verloo distinguished between structural intersectionality - how multiple systems of inequality intersect institutionally and socially - and political intersectionality - how policies and agendas can marginalise some groups and privilege others. She noted that EU policy often neglects both dimensions by taking a 'one-size-fits-all' approach and overlooking how institutional structures shape inequalities.

Verloo identified three main problems: first, the failure to differentiate between intersecting categories, which obscures the uniqueness of intersecting oppressions; second, the risk of political competition, where anti-discrimination policies can pit groups against each other rather than promoting alliances; and third, the neglect of structural factors, as EU policies often focus narrowly on individual rights and anti-discrimination laws, ignoring cultural and systemic forces that reproduce inequality. She called for a more comprehensive, context-sensitive approach and urged policymakers to consider inequalities in their dynamic context and embeddedness in political and institutional structures and to go beyond purely legalistic frameworks.

Although the early critiques by van der Hoogte and Kingma (2004) and Verloo (2006) were important in highlighting the limitations of gender equality policies when applied to women in intersecting contexts of discrimination, later studies reveal persistent gaps in the literature. These critiques focused on the conceptual and structural dimensions of

intersectionality, such as the relationship between cultural marginalisation and poverty or the intersection of legal policies with social dynamics, but they did not adequately assess how these concepts are applied in practice at the European and national institutional levels.

Theoretical Expansion

After the initial criticism in the mid-2000s, the years between 2009 and 2012 witnessed an important phase of theoretical expansion in which scholars began to systematically link intersectionality to the institutional and legal framework of the European Union. This period marked the transition from criticising the absence of intersectional thinking in EU policy to exploring concrete ways of integrating it.

Kantola (2009) and Koldinská (2009) initiated this shift by exploring how intersectionality could be embedded in EU law and equality directives. Their work emphasised both the possibilities and limitations of translating an academic concept into the legal and bureaucratic language of EU governance. Schiek (2011) took this discussion further by analysing how legal frameworks could capture the complexity of intersecting inequalities, while highlighting the risks of oversimplification when law treats inequalities as discrete categories.

In parallel, Hankivsky (2011) created an advanced analytical framework to facilitate the application of intersectionality in policymaking. She developed methodological frameworks that enable decision-makers to recognise and understand the impact of different forms of discrimination on affected groups, such as gender, race, disability and other dimensions. These efforts were an important step towards making intersectionality a practical tool for planning and policymaking, rather than just a theoretical concept. These frameworks provide tools for evaluating existing and developing new policies

that better address the complex challenges faced by different individuals and groups.

Furthermore, Lombardo (2012) focused on the democratic and political dimensions of intersectionality, arguing that the inclusion of this concept is not limited to legal or institutional frameworks, but also includes mechanisms for democratic participation and accountability. Lombardo emphasised that greater participation of affected groups in the decision-making process contributes to the formulation of more inclusive and equitable policies and enables marginalised voices to be heard and considered in the design of programmes and policies. This link between intersectionality and democratic governance represents an important step in broadening the theoretical understanding of the concept, which is evolving from a tool for analysing discrimination to a mechanism for promoting community participation and achieving social justice.

Although the work of Kantola (2009), Koldinská (2009) and Schiek & Lawson (2011) has attempted to close this gap by exploring the possibilities of integrating intersectionality into European legislation and institutions, the literature continues to ignore some fundamental issues: firstly, there is a clear gap between legal texts and institutional discourse on the one hand and the concrete consequences for groups affected by multiple discrimination on the other. Secondly, studies often focus on certain intersections (gender, ethnicity and disability) while neglecting other dimensions such as religion, nationality or socio-economic status, which limits the comprehensiveness of the analysis. Thirdly, there is a lack of field research examining mechanisms for co-operation between European and national institutions and civil society to ensure that adopted policies are translated into practical outcomes that effectively address intersectional discrimination.

Epistemological Debates

Between 2014 and 2017, studies on intersectionality in the European Union began to move from a focus on legal and institutional possibilities to epistemological critique and in-depth theoretical analysis. Siim (2014) and Agustín (2014) noted that the process of integrating intersectionality into European institutions is at risk of being politically dismantled, moving from a tool for feminist and anti-discrimination activism to a purely formal framework for compliance with official laws and policies. In other words, there is a danger that the function of intersectionality will evolve from a critical tool that questions the social and political structures that produce discrimination to an administrative tool that ensures compliance with EU standards without actually helping to combat the actual intersectionality of different forms of discrimination.

At the same time, Nash (2017) emphasised the theoretical ambiguity an internal tension of the concept of intersectionality when attempting to apply it to European policies. He noted that the lack of a specific definition or clear framework for application leads to practical difficulties for institutions, both in drafting legislation and in implementing policies. This ambiguity leads to problems in translating theory into effective institutional practice, as institutions may treat discrimination as a set of discrete categories such as gender, race, or disability, rather than considering the complex interplay between these categories. The result is that the measures adopted are often inadequate to address the real problems faced by individuals who face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.

Furthermore, Howard (2017) focussed on the contradictions between the goals of the feminist movement and the strategies of the European Union. While the feminist movement seeks to change social and political structures and tackle systemic discrimination, European institutions tend to favour more

conservative approaches that focus on formal or partial solutions to problems rather than addressing complex structural intersections. This reflects a mismatch between theory and practise, as official policies on the ground may achieve limited results and fail to fully meet the diverse needs of affected communities.

Despite the theoretical advances achieved by the literature has made at this stage in broadening the debate on the integration of intersectionality into European policy, some fundamental gaps remain. Firstly, the lack of a clear framework for practical application has led to a persistent gap between what is proposed in theory and what is implemented in practise, particularly in terms of addressing the structural complexity of intersecting discrimination. Secondly, most studies are limited to specific dimensions of discrimination, such as gender, race, or disability, while more complex interactions and the multiple local dynamics caused by different contexts are not taken into account. This limits the scope of the analysis and makes its results incomplete. Finally, there are hardly any longitudinal studies that track the long-term effects of these interventions, which weakens the ability to assess the sustainability of the interventions and understand their actual impact on the target groups.

Applied and Policy-Oriented Studies (2019–2024):

Since 2019, academic literature has begun to focus explicitly on the practical phase of integrating intersectionality into EU external policies and programmes, with the aim of translating theory into actionable practises within the institutions. Chaplin (2019) explored the issue of operationalisation and emphasised the need for a clear methodological framework to identify and measure the intersection of different forms of discrimination. The study emphasised that integrating intersectionality does not simply mean adding new

dimensions to policy, but rather requires a restructuring of institutional processes so that every stage of policy- from planning to implementation and evaluation- reflects the complex intersections of gender, ethnicity, disability, economic status and other social factors. Chaplin also pointed out that the biggest challenge is to provide practical measurement tools to ensure that policy does not just remain formal and has a tangible impact on the groups affected.

In this sense, Debusscher (2020, 2024) also made a crucial contribution by analysing EU foreign policy and development cooperation programmes, with a particular focus on women's empowerment. These studies focused on how to design programmes that take into account the intersection of different forms of discrimination so that they better address the needs of the target groups. The results showed that the integration of intersectionality faces several challenges. These include the lack of coordination between different units within institutions, resource constraints and a lack of sufficient field data to assess the actual impact of interventions. Debusscher also showed that any attempt to integrate intersectionality into development cooperation programmes can only be effective if it takes into account the contextual differences between target communities and groups. Public policies often fail to address complex intersections when they are limited to a single dimension of discrimination or are applied uniformly without taking social and cultural diversity into account.

In recent studies, Barroso (2024) and Strader (2024) have focused on the application of intersectionality in current European programmes and policies, highlighting the significant progress that has been made in integrating this concept into policy design and implementation mechanisms. These studies discussed how intersectionality can become part of programme evaluation processes and monitoring and evaluation strategies so that institutions can

identify weaknesses in policies and adapt them to address the intersections between different dimensions of discrimination. However, the studies also pointed out that institutional challenges remain. These include the difficulty of coordinating work between different agencies and ensuring the genuine and effective participation of affected groups in policy design and implementation, as well as the ongoing need to allocate sufficient resources to support a multidimensional approach and achieve tangible results on the ground.

After this overview of the literature's contributions to the integration of intersectionality into EU policy, it is clear that theoretical and institutional progress have not yet been accompanied by parallel change at the practical level and in practice, leaving several gaps that this research attempts to address.

Conceptual gaps: Despite the breadth of theoretical discussions, intersectionality continues to be used in the literature as an academic analytical tool to explain intersecting forms of discrimination without becoming a practical tool to guide the design of funded programmes and projects. This is particularly true for cooperation programmes between EU countries and neighbouring countries.

Methodological gaps: Methodologically, studies to date are predominantly theoretical or analyse policy documents and legislation, while field research based on interviews or direct interaction with beneficiaries is very limited. The lack of such a field-based approach reinforces the discrepancy between conceptual frameworks and stated policies on the one hand and actual results on the ground on the other. Furthermore, the focus on the EU as legislator and policy maker leads studies to completely neglect the practical implementation phases of projects where the challenges associated with intersectionality actually unfold.

Geographical and contextual gaps: At the geographical and contextual level, most of the literature has focussed on Northern and Western Europe, where the institutional environment is more stable. In contrast, less attention has been paid to the southern Mediterranean, despite it being an important area for understanding the interaction between European politics and complex local political and cultural contexts. Moreover, comparative analyses between countries of the Global South (such as Palestine, Jordan and Morocco) are lacking, which prevents the literature from observing how the meaning of empowerment and justice is reshaped in different contexts.

This research seeks to address these gaps by using the ENI CBC MED programme as a case study. It comprises some 80 cross-border projects in a Mediterranean region characterised by political and social diversity. In contrast to the prevailing documentary approach, the research relies on interviews with the project implementers and the beneficiaries themselves, so that the voices of the marginalised and their experiences can be directly analysed. The research also employs nine intersectional principles as a standard analytical tool to assess how projects apply intersectional concepts in practice. Finally, the research offers a qualitative contribution through a comparative approach between the Southern Mediterranean countries, showing how the meaning of empowerment and the mechanisms for resisting discrimination differ from one context to another and contribute to a more comprehensive and realistic understanding of intersectionality in European politics.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This chapter aims to present the methodology used in the research to explore how intersectionality is taken into account in the European Union programmes implemented in the Mediterranean region. It discusses selecting a case study of the ENI CBC Med programme. It also refers to the methods of data collection. It presents the methods of data analysis to characterise the intersectional methodology used in the research in terms of how the intersectional approach influences the interview design, sample selection, and data analysis, and finally, how the application of intersectionality in the research is used as an analytical methodology and not just a theoretical framework.

Research Design

This research methodology is based on a qualitative design to achieve a deep and comprehensive understanding of how the principles of intersectionality are integrated into the design, implementation, and evaluation of the ENI CBC MED cross-border cooperation programme in the Mediterranean region. The complex and layered nature of the topic of intersectionality, where gender, race, religion, identity, and other factors intersect, on the one hand, and the nature of the Mediterranean region, which includes a broad spectrum of intertwined nationalities, languages, and ethnicities, on the other, necessitate qualitative analytical tools. These tools allow for exploring the social, economic, institutional, and political contexts that influence this process.

Through qualitative design, it becomes possible to gain a deep and genuine understanding of the lived experiences of both the programme's target groups and the personnel implementing its projects. It also reveals the

programme's direct impact on stakeholders, something that cannot be fully understood from the written descriptions of the programme found in project documents or from the documentation available in published reports.

Case Study

The case study approach was chosen to ensure an in-depth examination of the extent to which intersectionality is taken into account in EU programmes by examining the European Neighbourhood Instrument's (ENI) Cross-Border Cooperation in the Mediterranean (CBC MED) programme. The case study also helps to highlight the gaps between the theoretical concept of the programme and its practical implementation, i.e. to compare its case study or case study what the EU prescribes in terms of integrating intersectionality and what actually happens on the ground.

Intersectionality is, by nature, a complex and difficult topic to understand. The case study approach avoids oversimplification and enables a better understanding of people and their experiences. It also helps to uncover complex and interconnected relationships and understand how categories such as gender, age, ethnicity, race, geographical location, etc, intersect and shape experiences of marginalisation or exclusion.

The case study approach also helps to focus on the local context rather than the general European discourse. For example, rather than analysing "empowerment" as a Western, for example, rather than analysing "empowerment" solely as a Western liberal or democratic concept, where "liberal" often refers to individual rights, personal choice, and self-determination, and "democratic" emphasises participation in formal political processes. This case study helps to present contextual knowledge from the final beneficiaries of the programmes and the workers in the target projects. This

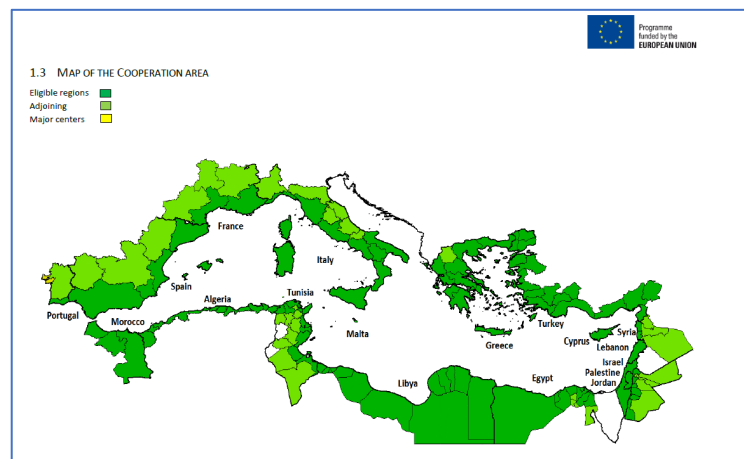
critical intersectional analysis used in this research aligns with the essence of intersectionality, which aims to deconstruct the pejorative knowledge that not only generalises the experiences of the target communities but also the contributions and tools used. Applying this intersectional approach allows marginalised voices to be given a voice, which is essential to studying intersectionality. This approach not only enhances situated knowledge and considers lived experience as knowledge in itself, but also strengthens the intersectional analytical dimensions of the programme from the perspective of the beneficiaries, rather than just that of the European Union as the donor.

Choosing ENI CBC MED as A Case Study

The European Neighbourhood Instrument Cross-Border Cooperation Programme for the Mediterranean Basin (ENI CBC MED, 2014 – 2022, was selected as the case study for this research due to its geographic and demographic diversity, unique administrative structure, and multidimensional development themes that intersect directly with both theoretical and practical challenges of intersectionality. These factors make it an ideal model for analysing how EU-funded programmes engage with marginalised and intersecting groups in neighbouring regions.

First, from a geographical perspective, the programme spans thirteen countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea, including EU Member States (such as France, Italy, Cyprus, Spain, Greece, and Malta), as well as Southern partner countries under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), such as Palestine, Jordan, Tunisia, Egypt, Israel and Lebanon. These countries cover 112

territories¹ and are home to approximately 198 million inhabitants. This enormous geographical and cultural diversity reflects considerable differences in political, social and economic structures, languages, religions and ethnic and gender identities. This complexity provides fertile ground for understanding how a standardised funding framework can do justice to such deep and multi-layered diversity.



Maps 1: Cross-Border Cooperation Within the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI)

Second, its decentralised governance distinguishes the programme from many other EU programs. The Managing Authority (MA), the highest administrative body, is not based in Brussels but in the autonomous region of Sardinia, specifically in Cagliari, Italy. This geographic and political positioning gives the programme a character more attuned to local Mediterranean contexts. It potentially allows for more grounded policy adaptation and context-sensitive implementation, unlike traditional centralised EU administration, which may operate through a singular, dominant lens.

Third, the programme covers four primary development objectives:

¹ According to the programme, participation eligibility varies by country: in some countries, the entire territory is eligible, while in others, only specific territories may participate. In total, 112 territories across all countries are eligible.

1. SMEs And Business Development
2. Technology Transfer and Innovation
3. Social Inclusion and the Fight Against Poverty
4. Environment and Climate Change

This thematic diversity provides a broad platform for exploring how intersectional perspectives can, or cannot, be integrated across development sectors. Notably, the third objective specifically targets marginalised groups such as NEETs (young people not in education, employment, or training) and women, making it a central analytical axis for this research in assessing whether intersectionality is meaningfully embedded in the design and implementation of EU programs.



Figure 6: ENI CBC MED Thematic Area of the Funded Projects

Fourth, the programme's governance structure is composed of multiple levels, including the Joint Monitoring Committee (JMC), Project Selection Committee (PSC), Managing Authority (MA), Joint Technical Secretariat (JTS), National Control Contact Points (CCPs) in each participating

country, and two branch offices located in Valencia (Spain) and Aqaba (Jordan).

This complex, multi-level institutional structure allows for an in-depth analysis of the distribution of power and decision-making processes. It provides a rich basis for analysing the way in which projects are implemented, the evaluation mechanisms and the criteria by which beneficiaries are selected. It also offers the opportunity to explore the relationship between institutional structures and local actors and the extent to which they can influence development interventions or merely reproduce existing hierarchies.

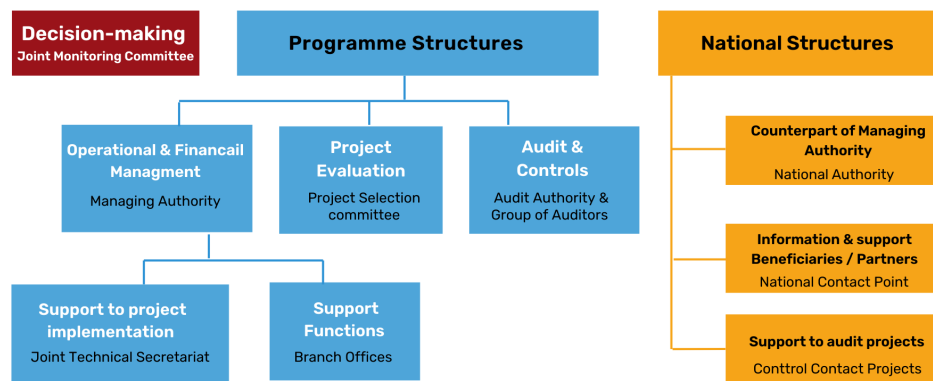


Figure 7: ENI CBC MED Programme Governance - Who Does What

Fifth, the programme operates within a region that faces shared challenges, such as resource scarcity, high unemployment, climate crises, and refugee and migration pressures. And a wide range of political and legal frameworks. This diversity raises important questions about how the programme addresses fundamental concepts such as social justice, gender equality, and fair representation when addressing differing legal frameworks

and social pressures. In particular, it is necessary to consider whether issues of intersecting identities are approached through a holistic and context-sensitive framework that recognises how multiple factors, such as gender, age, class, ethnicity, legal status, and geographic location, interact to shape people's experiences of marginalisation and opportunity, or whether they are reduced to simplistic, depoliticised categories that overlook structural inequalities, historical injustices, and local power dynamics. In other words, does the programme meaningfully engage with the lived realities of beneficiaries, highlighting systemic barriers and fostering genuine social change, or does it treat identities as isolated, technical labels for administrative purposes, stripping away the political, social, and cultural dimensions essential for authentic inclusion and equity?

Finally, the ENI CBC MED programme represents an ideal case study as it provides a rich model to explore the extent to which Western development discourses are embodied or contradicted in practice in multicultural contexts, particularly in the Mediterranean region, which brings together countries from the Global North and South with obvious economic, social and political inequalities.

ENI CBC Med, the largest cross-border cooperation programme under the European Neighbourhood Policy

- **13 participating countries:** Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, France, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Malta, Palestine, Portugal, Spain, Tunisia
- **€209 million** of EU contribution
- **Autonomous Region of Sardinia** (Italy) as Managing Authority + two branch offices (Aqaba, Jordan + Valencia, Spain) to cover the entire cooperation area
- **Mission:** foster fair, equitable and sustainable economic, social and territorial development, to advance cross-border integration



Figure 8: ENI CBC MED Description

Study Population and Sample

The study population in this research includes many active actors involved in the design and implementation of projects funded by the ENI CBC MED programme, as well as the final beneficiaries of these projects. The population includes individuals with different professional and institutional backgrounds, belonging to academic, governmental, non-governmental, professional and commercial organisations, spread across the participating countries on both sides of the Mediterranean. The projects under this programme vary widely in themes, focus areas, and goals, which is reflected in the diversity of the institutions and individuals involved. The study population was selected based on an analysis of the overall context of the programme, considering its objectives, thematic areas, and the complex interactions, relationships, and power dynamics among stakeholders within its multi-layered structure. This approach considered the roles of different actors (project coordinators or beneficiaries), as well as how decision-making, resource allocation, and influence were distributed. By mapping these interconnections, the study aimed to identify participants who could provide rich and diverse insights into both the operational mechanisms of the programme and its impacts on the target communities.

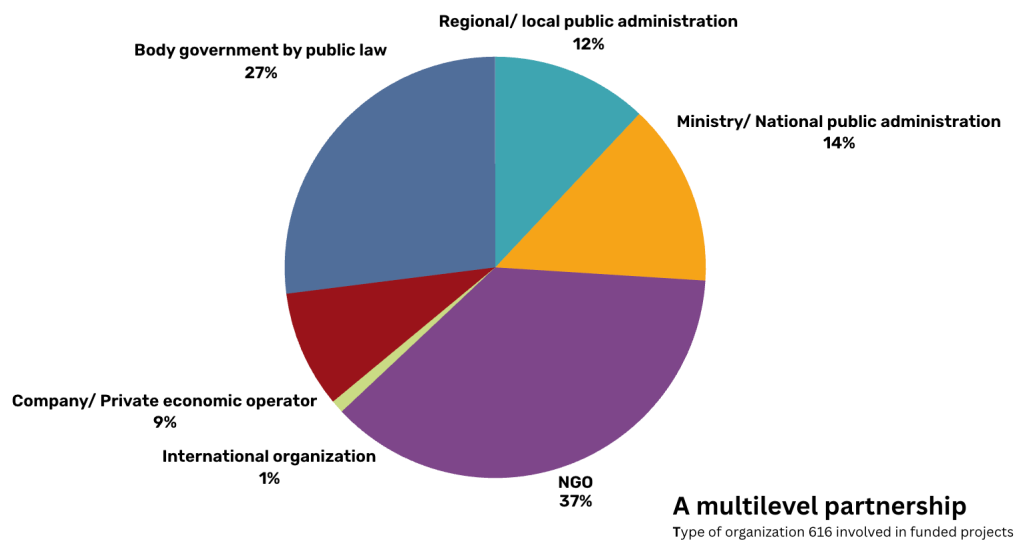


Figure 9: Partnership of ENI CBC MED

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling approach based on a set of predefined criteria by the researcher to ensure both diversity and balance in the sample, as described below:

1. Participants must be members of the management teams of projects funded by the ENI CBC MED Program, including project coordinators, technical officers, and both local and international consultants.
2. Participants must represent one of the program's countries, whether from the Northern Mediterranean (e.g., Italy, France, Spain, Greece, Cyprus) or the Southern Mediterranean (e.g., Palestine, Lebanon, Tunisia, Jordan, Egypt...).
3. Gender balance² among participants must be maintained, supporting the principle of gender diversity and considering the impact of gender on development discourse and practice.

² In this research, the term "gender" is used exclusively to refer to male and female participants, as it was not possible to access data on other gender identities.

4. A balanced geographical distribution between the two Mediterranean shores to enable analysis of intercultural interactions among partners.
5. Representation of the programme's four core thematic pillars (economic, environmental, social, and educational development).
6. Diversity in the projects' goals and development approaches, such as those focusing on women's empowerment, entrepreneurship development, environmental preservation, or improving access to education.
7. Inclusion of representatives from both lead partners and implementing partners to understand differences in decision-making levels.
8. Diversity in the sectors of participating institutions, including academia, NGOs, labour unions, the private sector, and official bodies.
9. Diversity in cultural, religious, and linguistic reflecting the Mediterranean's nature as a space of multiple identities.

Based on these criteria, 60 project members were initially invited to take part in the research interviews. However, only eight responded (mostly women). In order to expand the sample, the researcher used a snowball method to identify a further nine project staff and five project beneficiaries

Target Group	With Projects staff		With projects beneficiaries
Interview type	Individuals interview	Group interview	Individuals interview
# of interview	10	2	7
# of participants	10	7	7

Table 1: Research Interviews' Details

In total, twelve out of the eighty funded projects were selected for inclusion in the study. Seventeen individuals were interviewed: ten in individual interviews and seven in two group interviews. 10 were from EU and 7 from SWANA. All seventeen interviewees were members of the management teams of the selected projects, ensuring that the data reflected the perspectives of those directly involved in project planning and implementation. This sample size was determined according to the principle of data saturation, a standard qualitative research approach used to ensure sufficient information is collected to capture the full range of experiences and insights relevant to the research questions. Data collection continues until additional information no longer provides new insights pertinent to the research. By the final interviews, the researcher noted that responses were becoming repetitive, and core themes were consistently emerging.

The table below presents the participants' information from individual interviews as follows:

Code	Area	Country	Gender
M1	EU	France	F
M2	SWANA	Tunisia	F
M3	SWANA	Egypt	F
M4	EU	Spain	F
M5	EU	Greece	F
M6	SWANA	Palestine	M

M7	EU	Italy	F
M8	SWANA	Jordan	F
M9	EU	Cyprus	M
M10	SWANA	Jordan	F

Table 2: Participants' information from individual interviews with Project members

The interviewees also represented the four thematic areas: Technology Transfer and Innovation, Environment and Climate Change, Social Inclusion and the Fight Against Poverty, and SMEs and Business Development. They included representatives from both partner organisations within the consortium and the leading organisation. This information was not included in the table above to protect participants' identities, as the total number of projects is limited to 80, and revealing the thematic area or lead partner could potentially identify individual participants.

Moreover, the table below presents the participants' information from group interviews as follows:

Code	Area	Country	Gender
M11	SWANA	Lebanon	F
M12	SWANA	Lebanon	M
M13	EU	Spain	F

M14	EU	Spain	F
M15	EU	Spain	M
M16	EU	Spain	M
M17	EU	Spain	F

Table 3: Participants' information from group interviews with Project members

In addition to the project managers, seven final beneficiaries of the same projects were interviewed to enrich the analysis by including the lived experiences of those whom the interventions were intended to serve. These beneficiaries were selected using the same purposive sampling criteria to ensure diversity in thematic project areas, organisational forms, gender, geographical and cultural background. The beneficiaries came from five countries on the north and south coasts of the Mediterranean. All had benefited directly from one of the projects in which the staff interviewed were involved, allowing the study to capture the perspective of both the implementers and the beneficiaries of the same initiatives.

Code	Country ³	Gender
B1	SWANA	F
B2	EU	F
B3	EU	F
B4	SWANA	F
B5	EU	F
B6	EU	M
B7	SWANA	F

Table 4: Participants' information from individual interviews with Project beneficiaries

This diverse sample enabled the development of a comprehensive analytical understanding of the ways in which key concepts, such as empowerment, the context of target communities and the tension between donor objectives and local needs, are perceived and implemented in different settings. It also highlighted possible differences in interpretation and experience between project implementers and beneficiaries.

³ The countries were mentioned specifically without linking them to individual participants to protect the identities of those representing them. These countries include Egypt, Spain, Greece, Palestine, Italy, and Cyprus.

Data Collection Tools

As mentioned above, given the qualitative nature of the study, semi-structured interviews were used as the primary tool for data collection. This method allows for a flexible and in-depth collection of extensive, detailed data while being sufficiently structured to ensure comparability between participants.

1. The interview with the project's members:

The researcher carefully developed both interview guidelines (the individual interview with the project members and the group interviews). They were based on the theoretical framework of the study, which integrates the concept of intersectionality and its principles in the specific context of the Mediterranean region. The guide contained both open-ended and focused questions focusing on the following areas:

Introductory Questions:

- To begin, may I ask your name and your position within your organisation?
- Briefly, could you describe the project you were involved in under the ENI CBC MED programme and your role in it?

Interview Structure Note:

Before we proceed, I would like to inform you that the interview is divided into three sections, each containing four questions. Are you ready to begin?

Objective 1: Intersectionality in EU Programs

1. How does the project address different forms of discrimination, such as gender, ethnicity, disability, age, or social class?
2. How is the political context of the beneficiaries taken into account in the project?
3. How is the economic context of the beneficiaries considered within the project?
4. How are the cultural and social contexts in which the beneficiaries live considered in the project's design and implementation?

Objective 2: Local Knowledge vs. Donor Influence

5. How does the project incorporate the knowledge, experiences, and ideas of local communities?
6. How does the project balance donor priorities with the actual needs of local communities?
7. In what ways does the project acknowledge power relations and create space for voices that are often marginalised or excluded?
8. How does the project recognise community resistance and resilience, and how does it support marginalised voices?

Objective 3: Women's Empowerment

9. How does the project define women's empowerment, and what strategies are used to support it?
10. How does the project consider the impact of social structures at the macro, intermediate, and micro levels?

11. Does the project encourage self-reflection among participants and staff? If so, how does this influence its overall impact?
12. How does the project address social justice and ensure the inclusion of marginalised voices?

Before Closing:

- Are you familiar with the term “intersectionality”?

(In case the participant is unfamiliar, the following explanation is provided:

Intersectionality refers to a tool used to understand and address multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination that beneficiaries may face due to race, gender, age, ethnicity, physical ability, class, or other intersecting identities.)

- Would you like to add anything else?

End of the interview

Although the interview design was discussed with the supervisor and co-supervisor and tested through a pilot interview to ensure the clarity and applicability of the questions, the researcher decided to modified the order of the questions to improve the flow of the interview. Originally, the question “Are you familiar with the term intersectionality?” was posed at the beginning of the interview; however, it caused discomfort for some interviewees who were unfamiliar with the terminology. Therefore, the question was moved to a later stage of the interview to create a more comfortable and engaging environment.

2. Interviews with Project Beneficiaries

Initially, it was planned to conduct two to four focus groups to capture the perspectives of project beneficiaries. However, during the research process, it became clear that individual interviews were a more suitable and valuable method. Interviews allowed for deeper, more sensitive data collection and created space for marginalised voices to be heard, aligning more closely with the scope and values of this research.

The interview guide for beneficiaries was designed to be compatible with the one used for project staff, enabling a comparative analysis of how both implementers and beneficiaries perceived the same core issues. While the themes were aligned, the questions were adapted to suit the specific context and experiences of each target group. The interviews were structured in two rounds:

Interview Structure Note:

Before we proceed, I would like to inform you that the interview is divided into three sections, each containing four questions. Are you ready to begin?

Round 1: Intersectionality in EU Programs

1. In what ways does the ENI CBC MED project consider different forms of discrimination, such as gender, ethnicity, disability, or social class?
2. How does the ENI CBC MED project take into account your political, economic, social, and cultural situation?
3. Have you been able to share your own experiences, knowledge, or ideas in the ENI CBC MED project? If yes, how?
4. What does “women’s empowerment” mean to you?

- *Follow-up:* Do you think the project supports it meaningfully?

Round 2: Local Needs and Community Perspectives

5. Do you feel the ENI CBC MED project listens more to donors or to the real needs of people in your community? Why?
6. How does the ENI CBC MED project support people in your community who face challenges but continue to persevere (resilience)?
 - *Follow-up:* How do people in your community perceive the ENI CBC MED programme's interventions?

Before Closing:

- Are you familiar with the term “intersectionality”?

(In case the participant is unfamiliar, the following explanation is provided:

Intersectionality refers to a tool used to understand and address multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination that beneficiaries may face due to race, gender, age, ethnicity, physical ability, class, or other intersecting identities.)

Follow-up question:

Do you think intersectionality was considered in the ENI CBC MED programme?

- Would you like to add anything else?

End of the interview

The interview tool was made available in both English and Arabic to ensure accessibility and inclusivity. Instead of relying on pre-existing instruments, the researcher developed a customised interview design to address the unique context of the study. The design was reviewed and discussed with both the supervisor and co-supervisor, and a pilot interview was conducted to test the clarity and relevance of the questions.

Importantly, the research prioritised credibility over quantitative reliability. This was achieved through a gradual and iterative process of data collection and analysis conducted in parallel, allowing insights to emerge organically and guiding the research direction in real-time. Interview transcripts were continuously reviewed to identify recurring themes and patterns, ensuring that the findings were grounded in participants' actual experiences. Additionally, diverse perspectives were deliberately compared and contrasted to ensure the inclusion of multiple voices and avoid the dominance of a single narrative, thereby enhancing the richness and trustworthiness of the analysis.

Data Collection Procedures

- Planning and Coordination

- The 80 projects funded under the ENI CBC MED programme were analysed to identify 12 projects that represent the target sample.

- Official invitations were sent via email to project managers or coordinators, outlining the research objectives, ethical commitments, and confidentiality assurances.
- Coordination took place with partner institutions to identify the most suitable individuals for the interviews based on their roles and experience.
- Coordination was also done with final beneficiaries in each project, in collaboration with implementing institutions, while respecting their privacy.

- Conducting Interviews

- All interviews were conducted between February and June 2025.
- Interviews were held remotely via Microsoft Teams due to the geographic distribution of participants across different countries.
- Written or verbal consent was obtained for recording the interviews, and data were documented securely.
- The duration of each interview ranged from 1 to 2 hours.
- Interviews were transcribed verbatim in the original language used.

Data Analysis

The data collected through semi-structured interviews were analysed using a multi-layered qualitative approach combining thematic, semantic and synthetic analyses, supported by frequency tracking of key concepts. This approach was chosen to capture both the depth and structure of participants' narratives to provide a nuanced understanding of empowerment, inclusion and

development processes within the ENI CBC MED programme. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and reviewed in their original language (English and Arabic) to maintain cultural and contextual accuracy. The Arabic interviews were then carefully translated into English before being analysed. The researcher read all transcripts repeatedly to ensure immersion in the data and to recognise initial patterns.

A mixed coding strategy was employed, where deductive codes were derived from the research questions and theoretical framework, including intersectionality, postcolonial feminist critique, and donor politics. In contrast, inductive codes emerged from recurring expressions and ideas within the data itself. The coding was done manually and organised thematically, refined iteratively using Excel to uncover contradictions, tensions, and power dynamics in participants' responses. In parallel, semantic analysis explored participants' metaphors, language and culturally embedded expressions, particularly in relation to contested terms such as 'empowerment' and 'resilience'. This enabled the researcher to uncover the underlying meanings and discursive negotiations in different geographical and social contexts. For example, a specific typology code emerged around participants' understanding of the concepts of 'resistance' and 'resilience'. In the Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region, these concepts were predominantly perceived positively, linked to a historical narrative of overcoming colonialism and collective struggle. In contrast, in the northern region, the same concepts sometimes carried negative connotations. This typology highlighted the geographic and socio-historical variation in the interpretation of key terms, revealing how context shapes participants' meanings and discursive practices.

To deepen the analysis, a synthetic layer was added that linked themes across participant groups (project staff and beneficiaries) and regional boundaries (northern and southern Mediterranean countries). This layer

explored where perspectives converged or diverged, shedding light on systemic patterns, the dynamics of donor-beneficiary relationships and inconsistencies between programme design and local implementation. A frequency analysis of key terms was also conducted to support the thematic patterns quantitatively and highlight the importance of recurring themes, such as funding, participation, and inclusion. Although frequency was not used to assign weight or significance, it helped to confirm the centrality of particular concerns in participants' narratives.

Throughout the analysis process, the researcher maintained a reflexive attitude by keeping regular diaries to reflect on her position as a researcher from the Global South and former project manager. The triangulation of thematic, semantic and synthetic methods helped to reduce bias and validate interpretations to ensure a comprehensive, rigorous and contextually grounded understanding of how intersectionality and power are negotiated within the ENI CBC MED programme.

Themes:

The analysis employed both semantic and thematic approaches, resulting in a set of codes that were integrated and categorised into six main themes, which they will be presented in the next few chapters as following:

Chapter Four – Results from the interview with the project staff

1. Understanding the local community's context.
2. Communication mechanisms with the local community.

Chapter Five - Results from the interview with the project staff

3. Knowledge and application of the concept of intersectionality.
4. Application of the principles of intersectionality in the projects.

Chapter Six - Results from the interview with the project staff

5. Definition and approach of the programme to the concept of women's empowerment.
6. The relationship between the European Union and the Mediterranean countries in the implementation of the programme.

Chapter seven - Results for the interview with the project beneficiaries

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

The research adhered to established ethical standards in social research to ensure the protection and dignity of all participants. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, and they were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Confidentiality was strictly maintained, no identifying information was shared, and all data was treated securely and anonymously.

Despite these measures, the research was subject to some restrictions. Access to certain institutions proved difficult due to bureaucratic hurdles or the unavailability of staff after the end of the ENI CBC MED programme in December 2023, which led to the termination of many staff contracts. In some cases, there was also a lack of interest in participating. Language barriers also arose as not all participants were fluent in English, so translation was occasionally required. Some questions relating to decision-making structures were perceived as sensitive, prompting the researcher to rephrase them flexibly

to ensure the comfort and safety of participants. For example, the question ‘Are you familiar with the term intersectionality?’ was moved from the beginning to the end of the interview. This adjustment reduced potential pressure on participants who might not be familiar with the terminology, helping to create a more comfortable and open interview environment.

In addition, the researcher's own positioning and previous involvement in similar programme contexts may have led to bias, despite efforts to remain reflexive and critical throughout the process⁴. It is also important to note that intersectionality is a complex analytical framework that requires considerable time and multi-layered enquiry to fully unravel. While this research provides valuable initial insights, the long-term implications of intersectional approaches in funded programming require further and longer-term research.

In conclusion, this chapter has outlined a qualitative, participatory, and context-sensitive approach, centring the experiences of project workers and beneficiaries as important sources of knowledge. Through in-depth interviews rather than document analysis, the research seeks to capture the nuances of lived experiences and local perspectives. The methodology draws on the principles of intersectionality and situated knowledge, aiming to acknowledge marginalised voices and provide a critical lens on donor-driven narratives. Attention was given to interview design, sampling, and ethical considerations to ensure care and sensitivity towards the participants’ sociopolitical context. Overall, this chapter provides a foundation for interpreting the complexities of intersectionality management in the following chapters.

⁴ For example, the researcher kept a reflexive journal throughout data collection and analysis, documenting personal assumptions, emotional responses, and potential influences on interpretation. Peer debriefing sessions were also held with the supervisor and colleagues to critically examine coding decisions and emerging themes, helping to identify and mitigate any bias arising from the researcher’s prior involvement in similar programme contexts.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS FROM THE INTERVIEWS WITH PROJECT STAFF: UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

This chapter presents the results of the data analysis collected through in-depth interviews with staff of the ENI CBC MED programme, using the methodology described in the previous chapter. A total of seventeen interviews were conducted, representing twelve of the eighty projects funded by the programme. The analysis employed both semantic and thematic approaches, resulting in a set of codes that were integrated and categorised into six main themes.:

1. Understanding the local community's context.
2. Communication mechanisms with the local community.
3. Knowledge and application of the concept of intersectionality.
4. Application of the principles of intersectionality in the projects.
5. Definition and approach of the programme to the concept of women's empowerment.
6. The relationship between the European Union and the Mediterranean countries in implementing the programme.

This chapter focuses on themes 1 and 2: how the local context of the target communities is understood in the design and implementation of the projects, as well as analysing the mechanisms of communication with these communities. The aim is to assess the extent to which the programme relies on local knowledge rather than donor knowledge and how this dependency affects the effectiveness of the programmes and their ability to achieve development objectives in the diverse and complex contexts of the target communities.

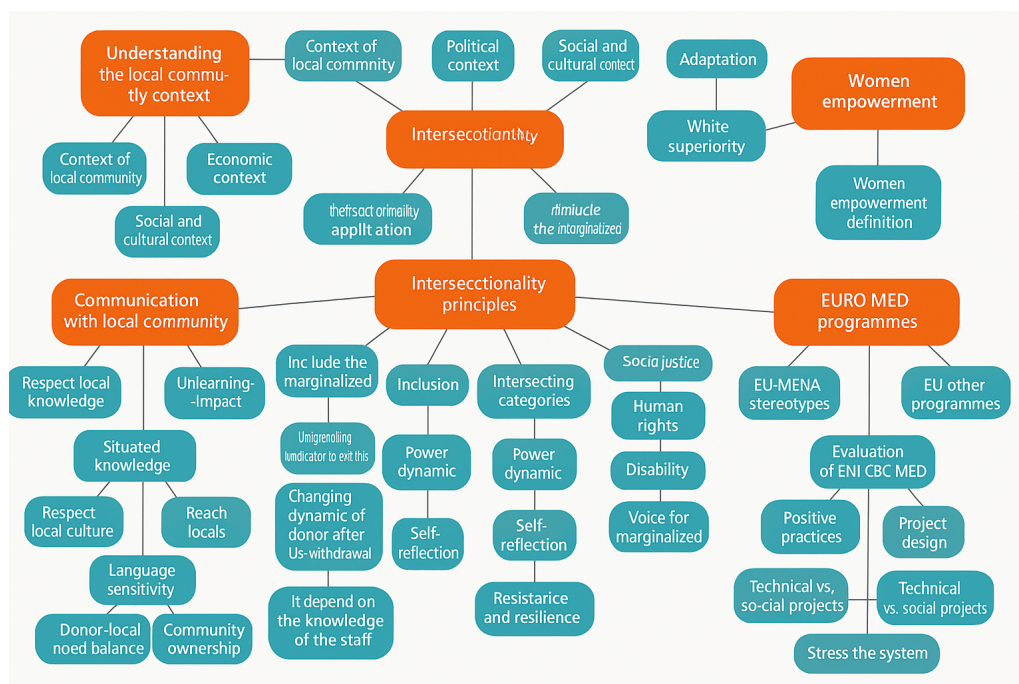


Figure 10: Codes and Themes Map

In the following chapters, the analysis will address the integration of intersectionality principles and concepts of women's empowerment within the programme. Furthermore, the role of Europe in the Southern Mediterranean and the relations between the European Union and the SWANA countries in the context of programme implementation will be assessed.

Theme 1: Understanding The Local Community Context

The analysis of the interview data reveals that the understanding of the local community context within the ENI CBC MED programme is considered essential, yet it is applied differently. Interviewees emphasised that, depending on the thematic focus of each project, there was either a strong emphasis on adaptation to the local context or a tendency to apply generic, donor-driven models. (M14, Female, Spain, Project Staff) noted: ‘We tried to adapt the project, which was designed at the regional level, to our local conditions. We

have a highly decentralised political system and also a huge geographical area, which makes local adaptation necessary for us’.

However, the views of the participants were very different. Some felt that understanding the local context is necessary in any case, as each context has its own specificities and characteristics that help to enrich the project and allow the development of different, customised solutions adapted to the local situation.

A project can really make a difference if it comes at the right time and is adapted to the local development and context. If the people involved know the goal they want to achieve and need that step that the project can help them with, it can make a difference. But in many cases, they don’t have such a plan or roadmap. (M7, Female, Italy, Project Staff)

One project manager explained that their project was built based on understanding the local context, starting with an analysis of the entrepreneurial ecosystem in each country to understand the general context, social networks, strengths and weaknesses. Following this, the main challenges related to urban development in each country were then identified, and then the focus shifted to defining the priority sectors to be targeted by the project. This sequential approach was seen as a key factor in the success of the project, as it enabled an assessment of the ecosystem in terms of linkages and functions, identifying stakeholders and their relationships. This strengthened the theoretical foundation of the project, as each step built logically on the previous one.

For me, the project design was logical and sequential. It starts with analysing the entrepreneurial ecosystem in each country, then moves on to identifying the main challenges in urban development and then highlights the promising economic sectors that should be prioritised from the start. This was carried out step by step and formed a very solid foundation for the project. It wasn’t easy,

but it wasn't overly complicated either, at least from a theoretical perspective.
(M9, Male, Italy, Project Staff)

In contrast, others argued that the importance of understanding the local context depends on the nature of the project. For projects that focus on social inclusion or working with marginalised groups, understanding the context is essential, whereas for technical projects or those not directly related to social issues, the focus on context is often less. Whilst it is important for the project team to be clear about the nature of the project, it may be an exception to the need for contextualisation simply because the project does not fall under the theme of social inclusion. This may be a sign that the need to develop interventions that are fully adapted to the reality of the target groups is not recognised.

So I think it differs actually from one project idea to another. Still, it is a very important aspect of projects like targeting social inclusion or those that focus on the environment of people with disabilities, disadvantaged groups, etc. It is very important to make, let's say, to design your project focusing on social inclusion. For other projects, it has fewer highlights than for other projects.
(M2, Female, Tunisia, Project staff)

In addition, many interviewees stated that the projects do not always match the local context and needs. For example, participant M 13 already mentioned, 'Usually there's a set budget for a certain activity, but we not only have to achieve that goal, we have to achieve it in a way that suits them'.
(M13, Male, Spain, Project Staff). However, despite the desire to fulfil the actual needs of local communities, they are often unable to implement this philosophy. As M7 has mentioned:

Sometimes, however, the proposed solutions do not match the actual needs of the regions, as they are often too theoretical. In addition, every project seems to be confronted with the recurring question of innovation: What does

innovation actually mean? In some regions that have not changed for 150 years, this creates a kind of divide. From their point of view, it is important to work on this gap and listen to the voices from the regions. Otherwise, there is a risk that financial instruments such as this programme will simply be seen as funding instruments, as many countries are used to in their dealings with donors. (M7, Female, Italy, Project Staff)

This underlines the importance of collaboration in such programmes, where each project team working in a particular country and context can learn from their counterparts in other countries, they learn about mechanisms and solutions to address challenges and see if there is a way to adapt and reuse them in their own local context. This also improves their understanding of the other contexts in the participating countries and makes them more open to other communities and cultures:

I mean, the context of the country, whether cultural, social or otherwise, is new, and therefore our experts need to exchange and understand with other experts. They will also grow, learn new things and face different challenges, such as the fact that climate change is playing a bigger role in the South. (M1, Female, France, Project Staff)

The projects staff who showed a genuine interest in local conditions, were characterised by a high degree of flexibility in both planning and implementation. They did not regard customisation as an optional adaptation, but as a crucial strategy for the success of the project. For example, to overcome geographical and infrastructural barriers, they organised online sessions and in local sites training workshops to involve participants from remote areas. They also facilitated access by covering transport and travel costs and providing local support to ensure participation. They also organised childcare for the participants.

At the management level, adaptability was equally crucial. Three project members already mentioned that they acted as mediators, not only in terms of language, but also in terms of cultural expectations and working styles between partners from different countries. As one project member noted, working with local communities required understanding and adapting to specific needs and expectations that were sometimes perceived as demanding. Managers unfamiliar with this dynamic had to be taught that such adaptations were not exceptions, but necessary for building fair partnerships.

It is worth noting that adaptability plays a fundamental role in the effective understanding of local contexts and the meaningful application of intersectionality within funded programmes, similar to the ENI CBC MED programme, in order to avoid the risk of remaining superficial and unable to address the structural and cultural barriers that determine people's access and participation.

Three main contexts were analysed in this study: political, economic and social.

Political Context

There were some differences in the way project staff perceived the consideration of the political context of local communities. On the one hand, some project staff devalued the importance of understanding the political context of the beneficiaries because they felt that these projects were more technological and their objectives did not fall under the theme of social inclusion.

To be honest, the project was never encountered with the situation where special consideration was needed for political issues, So we did not consider

the political context because it was not relevant to our project. (M2, Female, Tunisia, Project Staff)

On the other hand, several project members emphasised the importance of the political context for their projects, particularly in the SWANA region. While the political context is worth mentioning on both sides of the Mediterranean, it was of greater importance in the southern part due to the political instability in the region.

It was a difficult time for the last period of our project. It was prepared over three years, but due to COVID, the duration was extended from 2019 to 2023, allowing us to experience the difficult situation of the conflict in Palestine firsthand. Still, this situation also affected Jordan, and we also had a situation in Tunisia where a coup attack occurred. (M5, Female, Greece, Project Staff)

Accordingly, it is important that project members are resilient and able to adapt to the constant changes caused by the ongoing political shift in their region, which consequently leads to constant changes in the needs of local communities. 'It was totally taken into account because, previously to deciding that the project was going to create a new reduce sequence in the cities, we had to revise the political situation' (M11, Female, Lebanon, Project Staff).

In the case of Palestine, for example, the political context is very specific and complicated because it is under occupation. Therefore, we cannot generalise the needs of the local communities there. This means that it is necessary to design the projects in a more sensitive way that is appropriate to the situation.

let me say that, in the case of Palestine, there were additional challenges that set it apart from other countries participating in the project. Obtaining visas

was difficult, and borders were often virtually closed, imposing significant travel costs. In addition, political sensitivities affected project design and implementation, particularly regarding the areas in which work could be done or accessed. Although the criteria for selecting beneficiaries and the required application forms were uniform across all countries, the need in Palestine was far greater than in other countries. The political and economic situation, both before and during the war, made support there even more urgent. (M6, Male, Palestine, Project Staff)

In Lebanon, too, the already difficult economic situation has deteriorated even further following the incident in the port of Bierut. This had an impact on many projects. In one of these projects, staff was barely able to complete this project because their office was completely destroyed in the blast.

The implementation involved four ministers in different ministries. So every time you know the change of politicians, the change will directly affect the implementation of the project and the beneficiaries everywhere. Yes, we overcome this by really sticking to our goals, sticking to our project through our resilience, our consistency, to make it successful. So we did our best yet to handle everything in terms of you know, different things we have. (M12, Male, Lebanon, Project Staff)

These and many other examples show us how great the challenges are that project organisers have to face in an unstable political environment and how important adaptability and flexibility are when designing projects in these areas. Nevertheless, all the staff interviewed from this region showed an impressive commitment to adapting to all these changes and were able to complete their projects despite the difficulties. Regarding Palestine and Lebanon, the project managers working with Palestinians and Lebanese

showed understanding and empathy for the situation on the ground after the war in Gaza and Lebanon (from October 2023 until today).

If you add the occasion to work with Palestine and Lebanon when there is war, the people are not numbers. I mean, I was in continuing touch with the friends who live there, colleagues who work there that were escaped from their homes. And people are afraid to continue leaving or working, or so it seems. So you know that place, you know what they are living in and facing. And this is something that is the first goal of our cooperation. Learn to know each other to respect differences. But understand that, I mean, we are people. (M7, Female, Italy, Project Staff)

Several interviewees spoke about the impact of the ongoing genocide in Gaza on their view of EU programmes and their objectives. They were disappointed that ENI CBC Med has not taken a position or made any statements on the genocide, especially as Israel was one of the participants in one of its projects. This raised the question: How can they seek development, social engagement and cooperation while one of these countries is committing genocide?

Unfortunately, my thoughts about regional cooperation under EU frameworks are becoming darker because of the overall deterioration of the situation. If I would make a recommendation at this stage, my key request would be to put hypocrisy aside and be frank in the discussion about the values participating countries should respect to be partners of the EU. What is happening in the region generates inequalities that go beyond anything we were supposed to understand and manage through intersectionality. Small programs such as ENI CBC MED will see their influence and effectiveness quite reduced in such a harsh and polarised context. It would help if programme managers stand up and say clear words about these risks and their responsibilities. In Brussels they must understand that it's not business as usual. (M9, Male, Cyprus, Project Staff)

ENI CBC Med was originally designed to work with governments to help them solve political problems and gaps and “influence the policy environment to close the gaps”. A few projects were successful in this regard, as many interviewees pointed out that there was successful coordination between the public and private sectors. ‘We have worked with the municipality and the ministry, which is representative of the government. We have the law regarding their use and waste management, and this project helped achieve the law's goals’ (M10, Female, Jordan, Project Staff).

While some project staff highlighted the importance of working with the governments, others believed that it could be quite challenging because not only do they want attention and authority, but the bureaucracy that is entrenched in these governments makes the change-making process more difficult and challenging unless they actually believe in it.

The process of involving the focal points of these government institutions in the change process can be time-consuming. Projects can sometimes be finalised before the government's focal point is fully involved in the process. Therefore, project staff must work on several consecutive projects in order to achieve and maintain sustained support from these institutions. To ensure the success and sustainability of the change process, it must be designed to meet the needs of local communities. If the change has a positive impact on the local communities, and customized based on their need, they tend to remain committed to this change even after the project is completed.

‘I'm also positive that 80% of public authorities are not applying these solutions, not because they are not able to know, but there are many other problems. But, in a project, you cannot solve all these problems. For sure, there are some conditions that help you so, continue to work with the same municipality where you created an engagement, add already a small impact,

so they believe more and more that something can change' (M7, Female, Italy, Project Staff).

Similar to the SWANA countries, the southern European countries, though on a smaller scale, were also interested in understanding the political status quo of the targeted communities. They also focused on the local and national policies of these communities in an attempt to influence policy-making processes, particularly in places that lack clear policies. Some projects targeted local communities based on discrimination against them due to their geopolitical context, such as rural or marginalised communities.

Another point of view was shared during the interviews was that problem with the countries of southern Europe is that the European Union regards them as territories that are only there to prevent Third World countries from immigrating to Europe. At the same time, the EU arrogantly ignores the SWANA region and decides what is best for them without considering their real needs based on the political context.

If there's a person from Brussels or Roma. they are considering the region mainly for two reasons: to stop immigration and to exploit their resources. For us, it is an opportunity to really work with them. This programme is an alternative of the narrative in this moment of the Mediterranean region. (M7, Female, Italy, Project Staff)

In response to this point of view, one of the interviewees highlighted the importance of closing the political gaps instead of accepting the status quo, as well as focusing on the transformative change⁵; stressing the current system and pushing it to the right direction. What they tried to do during the project

⁵ Transformative change in development means making deep, fundamental changes in how societies operate, especially when tackling big challenges like climate change and inequality. Instead of making small, step-by-step improvements, it involves rethinking and reshaping entire systems to create long-term, meaningful progress in people's well-being and sustainability. It's about shifting mindsets, structures, and power dynamics to drive real, lasting impact.

was to build a model and tools that could later be adopted by the programme in other projects, to serve as a tool that supports achieving transformative change

I think that in these kinds of projects, which are transformative projects, the most important element is to influence the policy-making Environment in a way that fills the gaps, not, you know, just taking into account the state of the Art and the status quo. But challenging the status quo and trying to move it in the right direction. (M9, Male, Cyprus, Project Staff)

Despite stressing the importance of considering the political context in the projects, it was only highlighted in the interviews by those who believed in its significance, as it wasn't mandatory in the programme's project design.

Economic Context

The programme focused heavily on the economic context of the beneficiaries, as all ⁶interviewees mentioned the importance of designing and implementing the programme based on the economic context of the local communities. This indeed makes sense as it aligns with the main themes and objectives of the programme.

The Euro-Med region previously suffered from an extreme economic and social crisis. Even though the situation has improved, there are still some financial issues, especially after the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020. Moreover, there's still a general problem of unemployment throughout the region, which the programme attempted to address by funding enterprises and start-ups in line with the first theme (Business and SMEs Development) of the programme's thematic objectives and priorities. This theme includes the

⁶ The fact that participants referred to this aspect should not be interpreted as evidence that it was systematically or substantially incorporated into the programmes's design.

development of startups, Euro-Med economic clusters, and sustainable tourism. In this regard, the programme's performance has been good, since it has helped to increase the inclusion of the most vulnerable groups to unemployment- youth and women into the labour market. 'We also tackled the discrimination of being unemployed, which is very common in Andalusia, because we have a very high unemployment rate' (M13, Male, Spain, Project Staff).

The inclusion of youth was also another area because you know the unemployment rate is around, I don't know what the current amount is, but at the time it was around 22% among youth, so that's why we prioritise sub-granting and training for youth. (M8, Female, Jordan, Project Staff)

The unemployment rates were very high in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, peaking around 2013-2014 with youth unemployment above 50% in Spain and Greece, around 40% in Italy and Portugal. For example, Greece had an unemployment rate of 27.8% in 2013, and Spain 26.1%, both much above the EU average of about 11% at that time (Eichhorst & Neder, 2013).

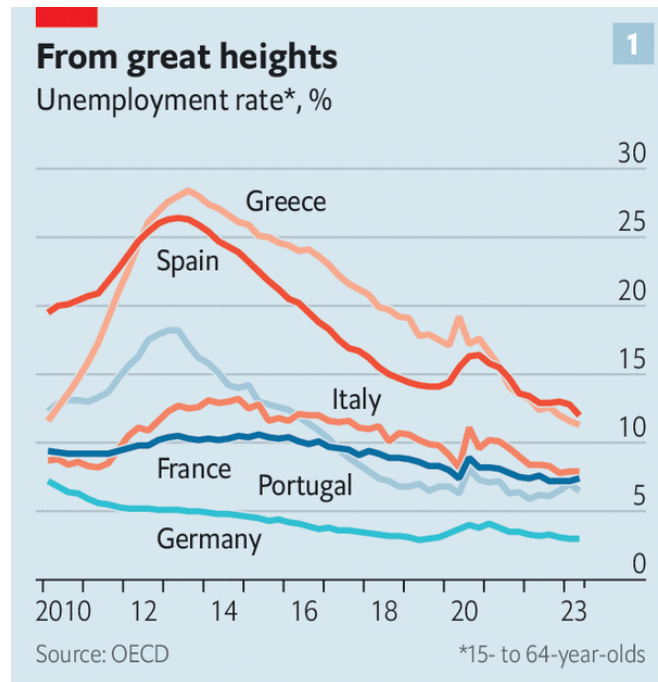


Figure (11): Unemployment Rates in Southern Europe, OECD

From 2014 onward, these countries gradually recovered with unemployment rates declining, but they remained higher than the EU average for many years. By 2024, Spain's unemployment rate was among the highest in the EU at about 11.4%, and Greece had about 10.1%, both still the highest in the EU. (Eurostat. (n.d.).

As already mentioned, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increase in unemployment in 2020, especially among young people. “Unemployment rates in Spain briefly jumped to about 40% for ages 15-24 and similar spikes in Greece and Italy.” (IEMed, n.d.) As a result, this had a direct impact on poverty rates in the region, as a number of sectors, including tourism, were temporarily affected. ((IEMed, n.d.).

As the main objective of the ENI CBC Med programme is to promote and support sustainable tourism, all projects in this area faced major challenges, including a complete halt to tourism work during the lockdown,

which led to the loss of the main source of income for people working in this area. However, the programme proved to be flexible in dealing with such a crisis. One of the interviewees, a project manager in the tourism sector, shared their experience in this regard.

To be honest, that was a key issue during the design subgrants, for example, or for trainings. The association that was implementing the project usually charges for training or, you know, a very minimal charge so that they ensure commitment in all but because we were implementing during the COVID tourism was suffering. There was a real economic issue in the area, so that the association for, for instance, dropped all charges. They made all trainings for free so that they reach out to the bigger group. For subgrants, we reduced the required minimum eligible co-financing to only 10%. We also accepted in kind contributions to co-financing so that we can actually facilitate the economic situation during that hard time. (M8, Female, Jordan, Project Staff)

One of the positive aspects of the programme is that it focuses on the sustainability of tourism and the increasing of the economic value of the communities. ‘We pushed the concept of sustainable tourism during the development of the project... so we looked at how many people are benefiting. How are they benefiting? What's the what's the percentage of benefits?’. (M8, Female, Jordan, Project Staff)

While the programme focuses on the sustainability of tourism, it has to some extent ignored the environmental and economic sustainability of the targeted communities. In general, EU programmes, have a clear lack of environmental and economic assessments at both local and European level, as well as the economic impact of the environmental crisis. For instance, on the long term, investing in innovative environmental solutions is significantly less costly than addressing the consequences of an environmental crisis. This point is rarely ever taken into consideration when designing projects, as the costs of

maintenance⁷ are generally not thought of. Real sustainability demands a long-term commitment, and not only a short-term innovation serving only “marketing” objectives. However, ENI CBC Med attempts to close this gap, even though the programme ignores the maintenance costs after the end of the programme interventions, which may result in the proposed environmental solution not being implemented satisfactorily for the target communities. ‘If you want to do a serious work, you have to consider the cost for maintenance, because it’s not just to bring an innovation, but after you have to maintain.’ (M9, Male, Cyprus, Project Staff).

On the southern side of the Mediterranean, working conditions are more challenging due to a more complicated political situation and instability in the area, leading to more economic challenges. For instance, in 2019 Lebanon began to face the worst financial crisis in its modern history. The banking system completely collapsed, the banks limited dollar withdrawals and transfers abroad, froze depositors' funds and converted a large portion of their deposits into Lebanese pounds at low exchange rates. The lira has collapsed: from 1,500 liras to the dollar before the crisis to more than 100,000 liras in 2023–2024. which led to hyperinflation, the prices have risen hundreds of times, and salaries have lost their value. Eventually leading to the collapse of public services, including electricity, health, education, and water.

Poverty and unemployment have risen sharply and emigration has increased, especially among young people and skilled labour, creating a vacuum in key sectors. This has had an impact on society in general and has affected the projects financed by the programme in Lebanon. On the one hand,

⁷ Maintenance, however, is only one component of a larger long-term financial commitment that must be considered: the “recurrent cost.” This includes not only maintenance but also a broader range of ongoing expenses necessary to ensure sustainability, such as staff salaries, energy, transportation, insurance, and continuous education. If these recurrent costs are not anticipated and integrated into future budgets, projects risk becoming unsustainable once external funding ends, particularly when implementing new environmental solutions.

the collapse of the currency has led to the loss of a large part of the funds that had already been converted by projects before the collapse. On the other hand, the collapse of the banking sector has made cooperation with the institutions in Lebanon a major challenge in terms of payment transactions and the sending and receiving of funds. This has severely affected the continuity of work on the ground, especially given the spread of the informal economy based on the "cash economy" and the lack of a real role for banks. This has exhausted the institutions implementing projects in Lebanon, so they increasingly need a mechanism to adapt to the rapidly changing economic reality.

Most of the population in Lebanon has been left because 70% of the companies closed their door in Lebanon. And the population stayed here, they lived on a very low level, so the economic situation was so hard. (M11, Female, Lebanon, Project Staff)

Similarly, in 2016, Egypt experienced a complete flotation of the Egyptian pound for the first time in its modern history, with the exchange rate falling from around 8.8 Egyptian pounds per 1 US dollar to approximately 18 Egyptian pounds in a matter of days, which continued to fall, to reach 50 pounds per 1 US dollar in 2024. This move was part of a loan agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). While it contributed to short-term stability, it also led to higher inflation rates and opened the door to waves of price rises.

The effects of the crisis on Egyptian society were far-reaching, as purchasing power fell significantly, poverty rates rose, and the cost of living for families, especially for food, housing and transport, increased. Due to rising unemployment rate and the high cost of living, emigration rates also increased. Here, too, we can see that the projects in Egypt required a high degree of flexibility in order to adapt to the fundamental economic changes in the context of the local communities.

We faced a very high inflation during these four years, and the last one was through capacity building for long-term economic empowerment. We trained around 150 Participants from the social sector, which is a very economical approach, as well as the projects trained around 500 participants and beneficiaries. (M3, Female, Egypt, Project Staff)

In Tunisia, there were political repercussions after the 2021 power grab, when President Kais Saied announced a series of exceptional measures aimed at strengthening the powers of the president and undermining the authority of parliament. Although Saied rejected the term “coup”, many political parties and human rights organisations – both inside and outside Tunisia – viewed what happened as a soft coup against democracy and the constitution.

This development had a significant impact on civil society organisations and development workers in Tunisia. The official discourse on civil society began to shift. The president at times accused such organisations of being “*foreign weapons*” or “serving external agendas” aimed at restricting freedoms. As a result, the freedom and space of these organisations shrank and many were reluctant to organise events or make political statements for fear of prosecution.

The power grab had a negative economic impact on civil society organisations and those working in the field of development. External funding for these organisations was particularly affected, as some international donors were reluctant to fund projects in Tunisia due to the political uncertainty. As a result, Tunisian organisations have faced difficulties and challenges in financing their projects, which is necessary for the continuity of their work. In addition, the Tunisian government issued several laws that aim at monitoring funds that the local organisations receive, putting a lot of obstacles on financial transfers. This required a lot of resilience in dealing with a new financial reality

in Tunisia. On a positive note, ENI CBC Med has not withdrawn its funding from the Tunisian organisations despite all the obstacles, has been very flexible in dealing with all the fluctuations and continues to support their projects.

Although Jordan is relatively more politically stable than other countries in the SWANA region, there are still many poor areas that require a lot of attention and need. Therefore, EN CBC Med has covered these areas with several projects to help the local communities.

There was interest in the economic empowerment of women and youth, as they are generally the groups most in need of such support. Women were supported through subgrants to establish startups. More than one project adopted an approach that focussed on understanding the economic environment and ensuring that the impact would include other women in the area. For example, one woman worked on her project with the help of the grant and involved other women in the work, thereby supporting a larger number of women.

With the money she received or the sub-grant she received, it was like having a renovation in her lap. And she included like five women and then accessories and activities like that, and got this sold and gave them the money back and so on. So it's like you are empowering people to be creative. And give them the the tools and the way. (M3, Female, Egypt, Project Staff)

In many projects, women are trained in project management, financial management, and other skills that make it easier for them to enter the labour market.

We also had an agreement with a bank entity That Provided an extra training on financial issues for women. All that training was arranged by the municipalities, which provided the facilities in which these Trainings were

provided to women and also provincial governments. (M14, Female, Spain, Project Staff)

To be empowered in the in the labour market, for instance, to take part in Labour market, or to be engaged in the same way as men do? Maybe it's a problem of Been sufficiently enrolled with the skills that the labour market is requiring, so an empowered women is that is endowed with the skills that the labour market is requiring. If this is so, in the case of our region, that was our thesis, we're going to build capacities, skills, capacities in women and we are going also to introduce Innovation having to do with digitalisation in companies. So that we can match them, we can match the demand of those skill profiles by the companies, and we can provide that skills from the parts of women. (M15, Female, Spain, Project Staff)

ENI CBC Med's approaches to women's empowerment are divided into a traditional approach, which focuses purely on economic empowerment, and a local community approach, which designs project activities based on the specific needs of the local community. 'We support the social and solidarity economy as an alternative. Through providing essential social services, creating jobs and operating in a nonprofit-driven way, we help enable trust and resilience within these communities' (M14, Female, Spain, Project Staff)

This local community approach, as an alternative economic approach, aims to create jobs and basic social services. At the same time, it reinforces trust and resilience within communities, e.g. a project that supports sustainable agriculture and rural innovation.

Most of the agriculture that is promoted there is intensive agriculture, so we tried in the project to target the mountain region. For two reasons. The first approach and the second reason were that we wanted to go to a region where intensive agriculture was not so widespread. So I think we could take into account the economic context in the implementation of the project or in the

selection of the pilot area, in this case. Another thing to consider when developing project hearings in the family is not only the political context, but also the initiatives and activities that are developing in the pilot area and are related to the theme of the project. For example, if we know that there are activities related to the food sector in a certain place, and we can add something, we can offer something. Yes, offer and add value to these activities to create synergies for us. (M16, Male, Spain, Project Staff)

Social Context

In contrast to the economic and political context, there was a discrepancy among those working on projects funded by the ENI CBC Med programme regarding the importance of considering the cultural and social context. Some stated that the primary aim of a project was technical in nature and did not fall under the theme of social inclusion; therefore, the cultural and social context was not central to their project.

We're talking about small enterprises development, and we're talking about business entrepreneurship. So when it comes to the cultural differences, it has a minor role in the consideration. For me, I've never thought that this is like a major impediment. (M6, Male, Palestine, Project Staff)

Others, however, stated that the projects could not be realised and successfully completed without considering the cultural and social aspects of the target communities. In general, there were no mandatory indicators required by the programme to measure the extent to which the cultural and social context was taken into account in the funded programmes. Therefore, the application was based on the beliefs of the project staff that it is important to consider the cultural and social context in the planning and implementation of these projects. 'Everything is built on the culture of local communities.

Infrastructure. Lifestyle. So it only makes sense if we embed this approach in the communities' (M3, Female, Egypt, Project Staff).

Some project staff pointed out that taking local culture into account is essential to achieve the project objectives without harming local communities. It is impossible to work with the final beneficiaries without understanding the social reality, customs and traditions in which they live. For example, one staff member explained that she worked with conservative collective communities in which the family plays an important role. This forced her to liaise with other family members and involve them in the project activities, even if they were not considered beneficiaries of the project. This is the most appropriate and sustainable way to help these communities and achieve a positive impact.

You gain the support of the family. I remember on one of the international tourist visits we had the beekeeper and his mum and his mother-in-law and his children and his children's friends with us. That was a really nice introduction. Also, we encourage wives and their husbands to join us because the wives who apply for our subgrants. Not the husband, so we give them both all the information, we explain everything to their husbands, so they feel confident. We explain it in very simple language. And not all EU projects include this in the implementation. But I think it's really important to go to the people in their areas or bring them to a very detailed, very long, very comprehensive session, where they explain everything. (M3, Female, Egypt, Project Staff)

In relation to dealing with the local culture and status of the women, one of the project workers pointed out that in her discussions with the women, she focussed on ensuring that their empowerment took place in a social context that benefited society as a whole and that it did not deviate from the accepted cultural context. For example, she explained to the women that they needed to be self-reliant and economically strong in order to be an active member of the

family and support their families. Because anything that radically undermines the values and social structure will cause society to fight the project and thus deprive this group of the opportunity to develop their economic and social status.

Another thing is that with girls themselves, you ensure they want to earn money to support their families, achieve a balance, and have a career in their lives. You don't always come and say "I want you to be independent and don't need your family". You don't want to be like the one who comes to break up the family. No. You want the family to be stronger. (M3, Female, Egypt, Project Staff)

Another staff member in another project mentioned that she had to deal with a very difficult environment where the women there were exposed to domestic violence and the concepts of society were complex, but she tried in every way to find mechanisms to deal with these social challenges without harming the lives of the girls. She worked with a local expert from the area and also sought out a psychologist to help the women in the target areas. Although the main goal of the project was an economic one, to help these women find a job or start a business.

Another project worker also pointed out how important it is to understand the culture when planning projects, e.g. for travel activities in conservative local cultures where children have to get their parents' permission before travelling, even if they are over 30. Then it is important to do everything possible to carry out the activity, e.g. talking to the parents, making sure they are aware of all the details, facilitating all the tools and manuals, speaking to them in simple and effective language and ensuring constant communication from the day they make their visa application until they return safely to their families.

We pay attention to women; take care to understand what they want and pass on information to them. But. Normally, in our activities or even social evaluation of the impact of social acceptance, we cancel the solutions that do not comply with the culturally relevant. (M7, Female, Italy, Project Staff)

Another example of how culture and social context were considered is the capacity building training. For example, many project staff reported that they tailored the training to local beneficiaries. In addition, some have already hired a local trainer and/or modified the training material to make it suitable for the location and in line with the background, social issues and cultural perceptions of the beneficiaries. They also took into account the language and gender of the trainer if the environment favoured gender segregation.

As you know, the Eni CBC Med programme usually unifies the implementation of the projects. However, we followed a very nice method that I feel proud that we did, we never implemented a training you know, a set training where everybody from all the countries actually had to go through the same training. system where elite consultant, an international elite consultant gives the basic information and then we trained local consultants through TOT training on a specific topic and then we gave space for each local consultant to customise that the training and adapt it to the local context. That also included adaptation to the audience, their backgrounds, their social issues, how can we address their cultural perceptions towards certain issues? So that was a key pillar for adapting to the cultural and social issues of the beneficiaries. (M8, Female, Jordan, Project Staff)

A project staff working on an environmentally themed project pointed out that adopting environmental solutions first requires cultural acceptance of these solutions. Change happens not only on the material level, but also on the social and cultural front. Other project staff agreed with this view. One pointed out that change in the Mediterranean usually happens when women embrace it,

as it is the basis for shaping culture and passing on customs and values. Therefore, the work must first be compatible and interact with the local culture. ‘In Jordan and in Tunisia, there was a social rejection of two circuits of loans and of direct exchanges, because socially, they said they were not very much accepted’ M4, Female, Spain, Project Staff)

So, these three elements, the political one, the economic one and the cultural one, they are going together, and they are part of a systemic Thinking on what we want to change, and sometimes the cultural dimension is maybe the most challenging one... My philosophy on how we can serve social-technical transitions. And you know that what you are challenging when you want to get some change is not only the regulations, or the policy side, or the economic forces, but you are challenging what is inside our minds.” (M9, Male, Cyprus, Project Staff)

Finally, the project staff mentioned that by working with partners in different countries, they have developed a sense of openness towards other cultures and a greater understanding of them beyond common stereotypes. This enabled them to better understand the political, social and economic realities of these countries during the project implementation.

Theme 2: Communication with the Local Community

One of the key points emphasised in relation to working with local communities is the way in which these communities can be reached. Trust plays a key role in the success of the process, from effective communication from the outset to the implementation of interventions on the ground and then achieving the desired impact. Some project staff pointed out the importance of having knowledgeable people in the local communities present at the beginning

of the projects, e.g. the mayor, someone from the government or an important and trusted person in the local community. The presence of local experts presents when implementing activities is also very important and helps to build trust in the local community and align the project team's actions with the local context.

This is a way of coming to communication and working with the local communities. We have established a long-standing partnership. With a network of institutions on one hand, we have searched to find out about this special kind of stakeholder institutions, including associations, chambers, Universities, Communities, local communities, and municipalities. So, we have established a network of this on the one hand. On the other hand, we have established A network between small and medium enterprises in collaboration. This way of working is very productive and very. Establish an approach between the countries of the North, the developing countries and the countries of the South. And in this way, we can reinforce the communication, the collaboration and the understanding between the northern and the southern counties of the Mediterranean. (M5, Female, Greece, Project Staff)

Project staff also pointed out that work in remote areas must include constant visits and in-person communication with the local communities. The relationship between the project staff and the community must be based on trust and mutual respect, without prejudices and preconceptions about these areas. Staff must not only have sufficient knowledge of these areas before working there but also be open to learn about the community from the people of the community themselves.

So to increase the impact, I need a learning process. I also need an unlearning process. I also have to deframe from the background knowledge I am supposed to have of that place. If we were to start a project with X country now, I should unlearn and then relearn about it... what that country needs.

And to learn this, it should be done during a project. (M9, Male, Cyprus, Project Staff)

There must be an initiative by the projects themselves to try to reach out to participants and facilitate their integration into the activities. For example, a staff member of one project organised a car to pick up women from their homes. Other measures must also be taken to ensure the participation of the local communities, especially the most vulnerable and marginalised groups.

In cases where some participants are unable to attend the activities in person due to distance or circumstances, there should be an option for online participation. This option has proven to be particularly important during COVID-19 and onwards. It is also important to try to use the internet to reach people, for example, via social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, or TikTok.

As already mentioned, respect for the local social landscape is essential when communicating with the local community. It must be based on respect for the traditions and social norms of the community. Therefore, the community participation in project activities must not be passive; rather, it should be based on the needs of the community and must preserve its identity so that people feel a real ownership of those activities.

Everything was done in the community. There was nothing floating... So it's a question of the mindset of the project leader and the partners, if they are used to working in real life., Then not a problem. So the answer to the question of how the project is balanced is that there is a good balance. If you know the programme and you're a good project designer, then you fit into the programme, but your heart is in the community. So if you embody the project design in the community, you know that the community is the body of the project. (M9, Male, Cyprus, Project Staff)

The participation of and communication with the local community must take place on the ground and not in theory. It must be inclusive, representative, flexible, and to some extent adaptable.

Because of the participatory approach that we used and our project, many meetings have been conducted to identify first the reuse circuit that they according to the survey, the results of the. Survey how this reuse of circuits. It means how it could be implemented in this community. We invited a lot of classes and a lot of, let's say, people to the meeting. Representative of the private sector students like schools, universities, even the, let's say, traders and so on. So much of their knowledge and ideas were indeed actually exchanged amongst them, and they helped us. A lot to define how to define the reuse circuits themselves and how they could be implemented. (M10, Female, Jordan, Project Staff)

Language sensitivity must also be taken into consideration to guarantee better communication with the local communities. This means using a simple and understandable local dialect. Some project staff pointed out that they played an important role as cultural mediators/translators between the project language and its objects and the language the local communities would understand.

The language sensitivity, for example, in our project, is particularly relevant when you have locals or projects that are based on locals, and you are inviting them to an event. This raises the question of how their participation will be directly and indirectly beneficial to them. (M3, Female, Egypt, Project Staff)

For example, one project staff member mentioned that when targeting women in their project, they don't explicitly announce that they target women and that men are dominant. Because such an announcement would reflect a backlash from the community. They simply try to use a language that is acceptable by the community. 'Enhancing this kind of global definition in a

simple way and in a way that is aligned with their culture and norms, and so on' (M10, Female, Jordan, Project Staff)

It is not only important to consider local culture but also to respect the situated knowledge of local communities. Over the years, these communities have come to understand their realities better than anyone else. They do not just analyse their needs but have also developed knowledge and solutions that are tailored to their specific context, environment and way of life.

The very first part of the project was its partner recollecting from their environment good practices from the local communities, from the Organisation, and good practices in reducing. So we produce and this is a published in our reduce embed web page And now in the programme library, a collection of good practices In reduce from different local communities, Tunisia in Jordan, in Italy and in Spain, Which was very good, because then the stakeholders that then helped us to create the circuits and run the circuits and we use the circuits they were involved from the beginning in this way So the group was very well cohesion probably because this activity took place.

M4

It was noted that learning and knowledge transfer did not only take place between the local communities and the project staff. Lessons were also learnt from the best practices and experiences of local communities in the partner countries with each other. For example, some projects included trips to learn about local experiences in the project partner countries. This helped to transfer authentic experiences to local communities with similar contexts, to learn from implemented solutions to tackle similar problems and to adopt solutions after they had been remodel led for the local context.

In Cyprus, I was amazed they have the Mandarin roads, they have the lavender road, etc. I thought about how this can be relevant to the beekeepers here, and how this is done through community-based activities that include

women and youth ... the honeybee festival they have is amazing, we try to do this in our country, and we successfully did this on a small scale. (M3, Female, Egypt, Project Staff)

We went to learn about best practices and how things are made in other parts of the Mediterranean. Specifically, these are things that have been tested and proven to be good practices. I think it's A way of reflection as well, right? At least it makes you think about how you're doing things and how you can improve your way of working. (M 16, Male, Spain, Project Staff)

Many practitioners in the countries of the North and South emphasised the importance of knowledge sharing between these countries, not only to improve cooperation, exchange and cultural communication, but also because knowledge sharing contributes to the development of all stakeholders. Many project staff pointed out that Europeans should learn from the existing knowledge, as the South is currently facing challenges that Europe will face in the future, especially in the case of climate change. The ability of the South to overcome and deal with challenges and the knowledge gained through best practices will help Europeans to better prepare for these challenges. 'For Europe, it is a new context. So, we have a significant advantage in working with the SWANA, because even with good knowledge here, we still face uncertainty about the future'. (M1, Female, France, Project Staff)

In addition to highlighting the value of learning from the South, some practitioners also emphasised the importance of ensuring a balanced exchange, where the technological and infrastructural advantages of the North are used to support and strengthen projects in the South. This perspective frames disparities not only as challenges but also as opportunities for positive transfer, enabling practitioners to turn structural imbalances into practical benefits for project development. As one project staff member explained:

More actions in the South shore are benefiting from the technological advancements in the northern shore, and with that, we can ensure technological transfer, for example. So, we try to take these disparities and this positive discrimination, or these privileges that sometimes we find in the northern shore of the Mediterranean, to our advantage and as a positive point while developing the project, the proposals. (M2, Female, Tunisia, Project Staff)

This chapter has demonstrated that the effectiveness of ENI CBC Med projects is closely tied to how far they succeed in understanding, integrating, and adapting to the diverse political, economic, and social contexts of the target communities. The analysis of interviews revealed that while project staff often acknowledge the necessity of contextualisation, its application is inconsistent. In many cases, flexibility, adaptability, and sensitivity to local realities were identified as the key factors for success, particularly when working with marginalised groups or in politically unstable environments. Conversely, projects that relied heavily on donor-driven models or generic frameworks were less likely to meet the real needs of communities.

The findings further emphasise that local knowledge and community participation are not supplementary but essential. Communication strategies that prioritise trust-building, cultural mediation, and recognition of situated knowledge helped to ensure that interventions were meaningful and sustainable. At the same time, the chapter highlighted the gaps within the programme design: contextualisation of political and social realities is not mandatory, leaving its integration dependent on the commitment and values of individual project staff.

The economic context emerged as the most consistently prioritised, reflecting the programme's thematic objectives and the urgent realities of unemployment and financial instability across the region. Nevertheless, social

and cultural dimensions often received less systematic attention, despite being decisive in determining the success or failure of interventions. This imbalance reinforces the critique that EU programmes risk adopting a technocratic, short-term approach to development unless they embed deeper recognition of structural and cultural barriers.

Ultimately, the chapter underscores the need for donor programmes such as ENI CBC Med to move beyond a superficial engagement with context. Effective development in the Mediterranean requires genuine partnership with local communities, where adaptability, situated knowledge, and respect for political, economic, and social specificities form the foundation of both project design and implementation. Without this shift, programmes risk reproducing the very inequalities they aim to address.

CHAPTER FIVE: RESULTS FROM THE INTERVIEWS WITH PROJECT STAFF: INTERSECTIONALITY KNOWLEDGE, IMPLICATIONS AND PRINCIPLES.

This chapter examines the extent to which the ENI CBC Med programme and its projects have considered the principles of intersectionality in both their design and implementation. This chapter examines how intersectionality was understood, practised, and sometimes overlooked in the projects. By analysing principles such as multilevel analysis, power, reflexivity, time and space, knowledge diversity, social justice, equality and resilience, the chapter demonstrates both the potential and limitations of the programme in addressing intersecting forms of marginalisation in the Mediterranean context.

Theme 3: Intersecting Knowledge and Implications

Before analysing how intersectionality was implemented in the programme, it is important to clarify how the concept is understood in the context of this research. As discussed in Chapter Two, intersectionality is defined here as a framework for understanding how different aspects of individual identity, including race, gender, social class, and sexuality, interact to create unique experiences of privilege or oppression.

The concept of intersectionality was not always clearly understood and was not consciously taken into account when designing projects under the umbrella of the programme. Too often the focus was on administrative objectives, targets, indicators and impact metrics with limited attention to how intersecting identities shape people's experiences. While there was a focus on inclusion, the depth of social complexity and lived realities was often

overlooked. Projects have sometimes failed to consider the multiple layers of marginalisation (such as disability, nationality, immigration status and social class) that impact on how individuals access opportunities and how they are perceived. ‘The project did not explicitly reference intersectionality, instead framing some practices under terms such as social inclusion or gender equality. While the design incorporated relevant principles, implementation was inconsistent (M6, Male, Palestine, Project Staff).

Most of the project staff interviewed stated that they were not familiar with the term intersectionality. Only three of the interviewees stated that they were familiar with the concept. These three showed a deeper understanding of the importance of an intersectional perspective in project design and implementation and also shared their experiences of trying to apply it in practice.

As a concept, we applied it and tackled it carefully. However, to be honest, it was really hard for the team because we were exerting effort to do more work in this regard, and we hadn't anticipated how complicated. (M3, Female, Egypt, Project Staff)

Those who were not familiar with the concept of intersectionality could be divided into two groups. The first group applied some of its principles intuitively, drawing on their experience of working with local communities and their beliefs about development and empowerment, even if they were not formally familiar with the term. The second group, on the other hand, did not apply or consider the intersectional perspective at all, simply because they did not realise how important it was.

As for intersectionality as a concept, its definition, its indicators, that was a weakness in both the project and its design. It's not that we intentionally applied intersectionality, it was more of a coincidence that we knew we

should include certain elements without having a clear, informed understanding of the concept. M6

In a region such as the Mediterranean, which is characterised by deep contradictions, intersectionality is particularly important. For some, the Mediterranean represents opportunity, exchange and growth; for others, it symbolises exclusion and loss. This complex reality illustrates why it is important to pursue an intersectional approach that goes beyond one-dimensional stories of development and integration. ‘Not everybody sees this Mediterranean as a big opportunity, but it is a big cemetery’ (M7, Female, Italy, Project Staff).

One of the project staff shared her personal experience of living between two identities: she was born in a European country, grew up in a North African country and now works in the same European country where she was born. In both places, depending on the context, she is seen as both an insider and an outsider - "the European in her country of origin" and "the African in Europe". This case shows how identity is exploited depending on the context. She was often labelled as European in Europe or North African in her country of origin. When it came to success or achievement, with her superiors trying to include her in their own track record. Conversely, she was labelled as 'the other' when her position did not align with the authority figure or dominant narrative. The statement "She's not quite one of us" shows how social meaning is shaped by power, migration and national identity, not just superficial affiliation.

For programmes to be truly inclusive, they must embrace the complex identities and diverse contexts of the communities they serve. Unfortunately, the concept of intersectionality was not mentioned, defined or publicised in the programme, nor were there any indicators to measure it. Therefore, there was no binding incentive from the programme to integrate an intersectional

perspective into the projects implemented. ‘There were no indicators to test this term of intersectionality’ (M1, Female, France, Project Staff).

Theme 4: Intersectionality Principles

Intersecting Categories

As mentioned in an earlier chapter, the intersectional perspective teaches us that people's lives cannot be understood by looking at only one aspect of their identity. No single social category, such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age or class, can fully explain a person's needs or experiences. Rather, intersectionality sees these categories as deeply interconnected. They shape and influence each other in ways that create unique experiences.

The project formally focussed on the inclusion of women and young people under the age of 35, particularly on the topic of business development and SMEs theme. Age and gender were clearly highlighted in the programme documents as well as in the call for proposals, announcements, grant application questions and project reports.

The gender component because it was a specific strategy to include as many women as possible in the innovation processes and a specific target towards the youth. So, we were looking for projects in the sub-granting having specifically both women and young people (M9, Male, Cyprus, Project Staff)

Taking into consideration the gender balance is a very important part when designing the project. When submitting these types of projects, we use templates to include them in the project idea and its description. (M2, Female, Tunisia, Project Staff)

Otherwise, no other intersectional categories were emphasized, at least not formally. There were a few projects that targeted people with disabilities, refugee women or low-income women and took an intersectional perspective by considering socio-economic class in addition to gender and age. 'We tried to include the excluded population, like refugees and migrant women, uneducated, unemployed, and informal workers. The community participate in decision making, process and policy changes' M12.

In addition, some projects targeted marginalised areas such as rural areas or areas isolated for political reasons such as the Gaza Strip in Palestine, showing an intersectional perspective of project leaders working in these areas that suffer from double oppression and require double efforts.

We adopted a strategic decision at the beginning of the project - which was not mandatory at the transnational level [programme level]- in the formulation of the project in the application form, and it was to address the actions of our project in the rural region to the rural women. (M14, Female, Spain, Project Staff)

Some project teams went a step further to include groups facing multiple barriers to participation. For example, one staff member mentioned that she hires a child carer at public meetings so that women can attend. Another mentioned that she helps women who cannot leave their children alone by organising an extra activity for the children so that the women can come to the workshops. It is interesting that all these initiatives were mentioned by female staff members.

I have another table I bring from my home. I love colouring books. i ask children to set there while we have the session going on... It's not mandatory, and no one can tell you not to do this. We don't target kids. But we can always figure out a way out. (M3, Female, Egypt, Project Staff)

However, these initiatives depend on the project staff; they are not mandatory, and, as already mentioned, there are no indicators to measure these measures. It is therefore up to the project staff whether or not they want to take a more effective but also more demanding approach, not only at the strategic level of the project, for example in the selection of the target local communities or the project activities to match the needs of the beneficiaries, but also in the implementation of these activities, for example in the case of the meetings with the local communities. The organisers can hold these events as a task or make them an effective, useful, and dynamic event that provides a real opportunity to build trust with the local communities and listen to their thoughts and needs.

Multi-level Analysis

The principle of "multi-level analysis" is a fundamental pillar for understanding how differences and inequalities characterise the lives of individuals. Three interlinked levels are analysed: Macro level, such as global or national laws and policies, Meso/Intermediate level, such as large institutions or organisations, Micro level, such as local communities and individual experiences. These levels do not work in isolation but are in constant interaction and influence each other. Their importance is determined by careful research and an understanding of the local context. This principle was analysed through research interviews to determine the extent to which participants are aware of the impact of multiple levels in shaping reality and how these intersections can contribute to the creation of multiple oppression or, conversely, multiple opportunities, making individuals' experiences more complex and interwoven.

From the interviews, it emerged that many projects focused on the micro level, e.g. on the individual experiences of beneficiaries acquiring new training and skills, and on building relationships of mutual support among

women in the same community. One participant expressed this by saying that the project had "changed her life" by really empowering her in daily practice. However, some participants noted that focusing too much on the micro level without considering the meso and macro levels sometimes leads to failure of innovation or lack of sustainability of impact, as the project "puts down the flag and moves on" without bringing about broader structural change.

At the meso level, some projects have shown that they are able to integrate their results into public systems and services, such as the integration of reuse into waste management in some cities, leading to far-reaching impacts in local communities. Others pointed out the importance of getting buy-in and support from experts and decision-makers to connect local efforts to the national level. 'We all should work together and learn to work together but Social impact needs time' (M7, Female, Italy, Project Staff).

At the macro level, some initiatives have succeeded in influencing national policies by changing laws or incorporating new practises into government budgets to ensure their sustainability. Conversely, some cases have shown that ignoring larger scales and focusing exclusively on the micro level can lead to the failure of the innovation or limit its impact. This underlines the importance of realising in advance the role that each project plays in the transformational change process across all levels. 'At the macro level, the policy instruments in the four countries were changed. They included amendments to the policies and the laws to include it formally, so it's going to be financed in the following budgets' M4, Female, Spain, Project Staff).

In considering how the programme applied the principle of multi-level analysis, a crucial element of its design, the programme followed a clear strategy to ensure effective participation of different stakeholders at local, national and regional levels. Common regional themes were linked to the national priorities of each country and then adapted to the needs of the target

communities at the local level. This holistic approach organically linked the interests of all stakeholders and allowed for more credible and effective results compared to faster but less effective strategies. Although this process took time and effort, it represents a model that can serve as a reference case in the future. It epitomises what Hankivsky have said about the need to address inequalities and discrimination across the levels of structure, identity and representation in order to deal with these multiple dimensions of the concept of intersectionality.

Power

As already mentioned, "Power" is not limited to the social and political structures that govern societies, but also to the ideas and narratives that shape the consciousness of individuals and groups. This is because "Power" excludes certain types of experiences, contributes to the formation of social categories through processes such as racial discrimination, and determines who enjoys privilege and who is marginalised, both between and within different groups. Power is a fluid and dynamic relationship, i.e., a person can enjoy privilege in one context and be oppressed in another, sometimes simultaneously. Power can be exercised over others or shared in the context of collective action and solidarity. The interviews reflected diverse understandings of this notion. For some participants, power was framed primarily in structural terms, linked to governance systems and institutional hierarchies. Others emphasised interpersonal and community dynamics, highlighting how privilege and marginalisation manifest in everyday relationships. A recurring theme was the recognition that power relations must be analysed within the local community context before designing interventions, as this allows for more seamless and inclusive implementation. These varied interpretations reveal that "power" is not a fixed or singular concept within the programme but is negotiated differently across projects and contexts.

The project begins with really identifying who's holding power and influence, and who's often left out of the decision-making process. This analysis provides insight into the interactions between different actors and highlights areas where inequalities exist. We employ a participatory approach to ensure control is in the hands of communities and vulnerable groups themselves.

(M11, Female, Lebanon, Project Staff)

When working in the field, project staff are often confronted with complex and overlapping power dynamics within communities be it between men and women, different ethnic, political, or religious groups, or even between social classes. Sometimes these dynamics are visible and relatively easy to address, but sometimes they are less obvious and more difficult to recognise. For example, the strong participation and involvement of women in community projects can appear to be something purely positive, and it certainly is, but it can also hide deeper dynamics. In some cases, men avoid participating in such initiatives because they prefer to get involved in projects that are more strategic, authoritative, or publicly visible, where they can receive recognition or fulfil certain ego-driven expectations. This example shows how complex and multi-layered the power relations in communities are. It also shows why it is important to take these dynamics into account when designing and implementing measures in the target communities.

We've noticed that women participate more in environmental and social projects than men; however, this is not the case in other types of projects... When we're working on a project that involves strategy or legislation, there will be like a balance, or perhaps the men will become more engaged. (M10, Female, Jordan, Project Staff)

It is also important to ensure a balance between taking into account the existing power relations and dynamics within the community, and at the same time achieving the project objectives and realising the planned activities.

This must be done in a way that is appropriate to the local context and viewed through an intersectional lens. In theory, this is already a very challenging task, but in practice it becomes even more difficult, as it requires real commitment and flexibility from the project team.

It's a matter of maintaining an independent status and handling power relationships and dynamics in a diplomatic yet firm manner. So, we're keeping the project on track. The project aims to achieve this, and you continue to stay on the stated direction. (M9, Male, Cyprus, Project Staff)

This also sheds light on another layer of power dynamics present in such projects: the relationship with the donor. In this case, the donor is represented by the EU-funded ENI CBC Med programme. Here, the project team must act as a mediator, balancing the needs and realities of the local communities with the requirements and expectations of the donor. The donor has the privilege of providing financial resources, which gives it considerable influence over the way the project is designed and implemented, and therefore also over the work of the project staff.

So, with the donor, because there is also a power relationship with the donor, which is not easy to handle. because there is a lot of power there. Again, you have to be careful, and eventually, you will establish a good balance in the respect of the roles. But we are not just getting money from them; we are getting money because we are good enough to deliver. (M9, Male, Cyprus, Project Staff)

The views of project staff on how the programme deals with power dynamics differed significantly. Some interviewees emphasised that the programme had dealt with these dynamics in a relatively positive way, while others highlighted the real challenges they posed. 'It was difficult. At the programme level, the power relations are clear, so that the managing Authority,

the Joint Secretary, have the power. And the lead beneficiaries develop the project, feeling the responsibility for it' (M13, Male, Spain, Project Staff).

Opinions also differed on the relationships between staff at the various partner institutions. On the one hand, some noted that collaboration was smooth, with there were no significant signs of negative or hierarchical power dynamics. On the other hand, others pointed out that the lead institution sometimes took on a very authoritarian role, which led to imbalances within the partnership. As M7 had mentioned: 'It was a very smooth project. We had a really nice relationship, so everybody was leading, there was this agreement at the beginning on who leads what and how they complement each other' (M7, Female, Italy, Project Staff). On contrary, M13 mentioned the power the leading partner has in the projects, e.g. in the case of the meetings: 'The problem is that when all the consortium members have a meeting, normally, the only person who speaks and gives an indication is the lead beneficiary' (M13, Male, Spain, Project Staff).

Such observations reflect broader debates about intersectionality and organisational power structures, where even in the context of collaboration, asymmetries in authority and decision-making can reproduce patterns of exclusion and limit the transformative potential of development interventions.

Reflexivity

Intersectionality not only addresses discrimination or injustice but also demands constant self-reflection. The idea is that every person, whether a programme staff member, a policymaker, a project team member, or even a project beneficiary, must ask themselves: Where do I stand? How do my background and experiences influence the way I see and interact with others? This kind of reflection helps to uncover hidden forms of power and privilege

and opens the way for a deeper and more equitable understanding. ‘It was truly beautiful, creating very memorable moments for participants to reflect on and make meaning of their experience and behaviour. And it was guided by different activities’ (M11, Female, Lebanon, Project Staff).

In practice, this aspect was demonstrated through the involvement of women and local communities in workshops, where they could express their opinions and contribute to the formulation of recommendations. This experience allowed participants to pause to reflect on their own experiences and reconsider their meanings, while at the same time feeding their opinions and experiences into the final decisions. There was also group work with communities and local authorities to map the resources in the cities targeted by some projects, and to stimulate joint reflection on the skills available and the best ways to utilise them.

In addition, training and mentoring programmes always provided space for reflection and feedback, not only for technical learning, but also for personal and collective experiences. This kind of practice prompted partners and beneficiaries to ask: Is what they are planning still relevant? Should they redefine their goals or change their methods? Do people feel that the training and support are really tailored to their needs?

But not everything went so smoothly. Sometimes, the focus was more on outputs and indicators in terms of numbers and results. These practical reports are necessary, but they do not provide enough space for self-reflection. However, the meetings between the partners from different countries provided an opportunity to discuss.

But during those meetings, of course, we were reflecting, we were reflecting as representatives of the partners. How did we manage to do? What are the challenges we face? We discussed this with participants from other countries,

and I think we had similar reflections. I'm not sure if that would be enough. I really don't know. (M6, Male, Palestine, Project Staff)

Based on what has been mentioned above, it is really important to be flexible when planning activities and adapt them to the changes after the reflections . This flexibility helps the project run more smoothly and gives participants the opportunity to reflect carefully, learn from their experiences, and advocate for social justice in a more fair and compassionate way.

Time and Space

The principle of time and place shows that people's experiences, and the privileges and marginalisations with which they are confronted cannot be understood in isolation from the contexts in which they live. The place they come from and the time they live in profoundly shape the way they see the world, the meaning they give to events, and the way their relationships with others are constructed. Time and place are therefore not just neutral backdrops, but rather active elements that shape the development of identity and inequality.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the programme has proven to be able to adapt to different contexts by making local adjustments that take into account geographical and cultural realities, such as considering social norms when designing activities or adapting schedules to local circumstances. Furthermore, some projects were able to respond to unexpected time shifts, such as economic or political crises, by reorganising their activities so that they could continue despite the difficulties. This shows a realisation that the context is not static, and that solutions need to be flexible and adaptable.

Nevertheless, the overall framework of the programme has often remained rigid. According to some project staff, strict timelines and predetermined performance indicators were set, as if time were a uniform element that could be equally controlled in every context. This increases the pressure on projects to address the reality of time fluctuations caused by the crisis. The same applies to space, where some interventions treated different environments in the same way without recognising the fundamental differences between different spatial contexts. In this regard, the degree of flexibility shown by the programme was a great help.

The problem is the time frame; you write the proposal. By the time you get awarded, it's a long time, so it needs to change. So no matter how prepared you are during the proposal writing, by the time you start implementation, there's a gap. The regulations for reallocating funds prevent you from changing the idea, and you're committed to delivering a certain set of milestones and reports. However, these milestones and reports often become irrelevant due to the numerous changes, which is why this is the issue. It's the reallocation and the change of concept, the inflexibility in that. Regulations make it hard to really meet the local community's needs, which change. So it's on both sides. (M8, Female, Jordan, Project Staff)

Additionally, addressing intersectionality remained superficial, with projects each focused on one identity (e.g. women or young people) without considering how these identities intersect with temporal and spatial factors. In addition, an imbalance in power relations between North and South was evident. The ability of some local partners to adapt to crises was interpreted as "instability" rather than practical experience arising from real circumstances. This reflects the persistence of a patronising view that makes time and space in the South appear "exceptional" in the face of a unified European framework, and ignores the colonial context in the region.

The Diversity of Knowledges

When we talk about intersectionality, one of the main concerns is how knowledge is produced, whose voices are included, and how power shapes this process. All too often, certain forms of knowledge are treated as more valuable than others, creating a hierarchy in which local knowledge is overlooked while institutional knowledge is seen as more legitimate. Intersectionality challenges this by asking us to include voices and experiences that are usually excluded. When the knowledge of marginalised communities is acknowledged, it can break through dominant narratives and pave the way for more equitable and inclusive policies.

In practice, this means that we need to recognise that there are different structures of knowledge. On the one hand, there is the formal, institutional knowledge that is often produced in Europe and considered 'standard'. On the other hand, there is the knowledge that comes from the communities themselves, be it through daily practices, traditions, or lived experiences. For example, some projects collected endangered recipes, farming methods, and traditional products as part of protecting cultural identity. One participant explained: 'I think our community cannot be sustainable if it loses the good part of its identity, that's a personal opinion' (M16, Male, Spain, Project Staff).

Such practices show the potential to shift from a top-down model to one in which local experience and ideas are recognised as genuine expertise. Here are some of the tools and methods that the project mentioned during the interviews, which they used to integrate local knowledge and ensure that all voices are considered:

1. Living Lab:

The Living Lab methodology was introduced as a participatory framework that brought together different stakeholders to jointly design and implement energy-efficient solutions for a project targeting university buildings in four countries. The idea was to create a collaborative space, both physical and virtual, where people from different backgrounds could sit around a table and work together. It was not only about technical innovation, but also about creating a democratic process where all voices could have a say in the outcome.

One of the strengths of this approach was the inclusion of all stakeholders. Participation was not limited to professors or administrative staff, but also included students, maintenance staff, cleaning staff and external stakeholders such as private companies, communities and socio-economic actors. For example, maintenance and cleaning staff were asked about their comfort in the buildings, and their feedback was taken into account. This type of involvement helped to ensure that the solutions met the daily needs of those most involved with the buildings.

Decisions were made in a democratic and cooperative process. The power dynamic was mitigated by creating spaces where professors, students, and technicians worked side by side, and solutions were prioritised together using evaluation grids rather than being imposed from above. Moreover, the methodology proved to be flexible and resilient even in times of crisis. During the pandemic, activities were moved online, and although physical meetings were suspended, stakeholder participation remained strong.

Through this participatory process, concrete results were achieved. Pilot solutions such as microgrids and solar panels were introduced in universities and attracted the interest of national utility companies. The success of this approach encouraged replication in other initiatives and showed that the Living Lab can serve as a model for participatory innovation in different

contexts. At the same time, the approach helped to overcome typical barriers such as resistance to change, as people were involved from the outset, and enabled solutions that were tailored to specific local contexts while fostering cross-border knowledge exchange.

The Living Lab also had an implicit intersectional value, even if it was not framed as such. By valuing the practical knowledge of maintenance staff alongside the technical expertise of professors, and creating a space where hierarchies were dismantled, it showed how different knowledge can strengthen innovation. However, the focus was mainly on technical outcomes such as energy efficiency. As a result, deeper intersectional dimensions - such as the inclusion of people with disabilities - were not systematically addressed. Future projects could benefit from integrating formal intersectional metrics into living labs to better track how marginalised groups benefit beyond ensuring gender balance.

2. The participatory approach to improve access to employment.

The participatory approach was at the heart of the project, which aimed to empower marginalised communities by involving them directly in decision-making and implementation. It encouraged collaboration with local actors: non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations and public administrations, to ensure that solutions meet real local needs. Focus groups and stakeholder mapping to identify and prioritise power dynamics were used as community-based planning with an emphasis on rural women, refugees, and uneducated youth. Participatory workshops involved local organisations to address cultural barriers, while marginalised groups participated in policy dialogues and multilingual online portals to improve access to employment.

The project adapted to local circumstances, including political and economic crises, by partnering with communities and utilising flexible EU funds to circumvent banking restrictions and inflation. Activities were adapted to circumstances, such as the shift to agricultural livelihoods during COVID-19. Cultural sensitivity was integrated through domestic training and sub-grants, while psychologists supported women experiencing domestic violence to ensure safe participation.

The approach led to positive outcomes, including expanded access to vocational training, job opportunities, and social services, and influenced local authorities to adopt policy recommendations that promoted alternative, community-tailored economic models. By integrating community knowledge with institutional expertise, it demonstrated the value of diverse perspectives in generating stronger solutions. However, the method faced challenges in overcoming hidden hierarchies of gender and political affiliation, and in reconciling donor demands with local priorities. There are also important considerations for the long-term sustainability of this approach, particularly regarding the provision of ongoing financial and logistical support.

3. Electronic Town Hall Meetings (E-TM)

The Electronic Town Meeting (e-TM) was introduced as a participatory framework that combines face-to-face discussions in small groups with the use of digital technology to involve a much larger audience in decision-making processes. The method is based on specially developed software that enables interaction across several tables, where participants sit in groups of six to ten people and share ideas with the support of a moderator and rapporteur. What is special about this process is the way in which the local discussions are linked together in real time: rapporteurs transcribe the main

points on laptops, which are then immediately sent to a central “theme team” responsible for collating feedback and producing instant reports.

A key strength of e-TM is its ability to democratise participation. By working in small groups, participants who do not usually speak publicly are given the time and space to share their views, while electronic tools such as survey tablets allow each individual to express their preferences anonymously. This ensures that all voices are captured and not just the most vocal. In addition, the presence of multiple roles- such as moderators, facilitators, rapporteurs and the theme team- creates a structured environment in which discussions run smoothly and results are systematically collated and shared with the whole meeting.

Another important feature of the methodology is the focus on concrete results. Rather than ending with fragmented conversations, the process generates immediate reports that summarise the key ideas, debates and voting results. These reports are shared with participants at the end of the event to ensure transparency and accountability. The approach also enables cross-fertilisation of ideas between tables, as the results are projected onto screens and used to guide further rounds of discussion.

At the same time, the method also has its limitations. While it ensures broad participation and captures diverse contributions, the focus remains on the efficiency of collective decision-making. Deeper dimensions- such as how different social groups experience power imbalances in these discussions- are not systematically addressed. The inclusion of an explicit intersectional perspective could strengthen the approach by ensuring that the voices of marginalised groups are not only included but also recognised as transformative factors influencing outcomes.

Despite these contributions, there was sometimes a hierarchy in which institutionalised European knowledge was privileged over local voices. Decisions are shaped more by institutional frameworks than by community input, so that participation is sometimes reduced to consultation rather than genuine co-creation.

Interestingly, several staff members themselves recognised this imbalance and suggested that Europe could actually learn from the knowledge and resilience of SWANA communities. Working in unstable contexts or with limited resources often gives people unique problem-solving skills. As one person explained: ‘I was surprised to see how the Lebanese work, even when they have no water, no electricity, only two hours of energy. And yet they produce great quality of work’ (M1, Female, France, Project Staff)

This recognition shows that knowledge flows not only from Europe to the South, but also vice versa. The South has valuable expertise, especially in dealing with challenges such as climate change or resource scarcity. by recognising this, the projects can come closer to a fair exchange of knowledge instead of reproducing hierarchies. ‘South has the knowledge, I mean they will know new things, and they will also face other problems, like for example, you know that the environmental or climate change is more important in the south’ (M7, Female, Italy, Project Staff)

Social Justice

Social justice is a fundamental concept in the intersectional perspective, as it is not only about the equitable distribution of resources among people, but also about changing the social relations and systems of power that create inequality. It is about tackling the deep-rooted causes of

injustice and finding new ways of living and thinking that ensure human dignity and achieve environmental, social, and economic sustainability.

In the case of the ENI CBC MED programme, social justice is not directly or explicitly discussed, but it is evident in all activities and projects. The projects supported by the programme address real problems faced by Mediterranean societies, such as poverty, social exclusion, lack of economic opportunities, as well as environmental and sustainable development issues. This shows that social justice is not just a buzzword, but a practical part of the programme's daily work. 'The aim is to create sustainable communities, and I believe our community cannot be sustainable if it loses its good aspects of identity. That's a personal opinion' (M16, Male, Spain, Project Staff).

The programme places sustainability at the centre of its work, so that the environment is seen not just as a problem, but as an opportunity for a better and fairer life for all. In this way, the programme links social justice, environmental protection, and economic development, and creates a positive impact at multiple levels: local, regional, and national. 'We pushed the concept of sustainability, specifically sustainable tourism, throughout the project's development, focusing on increasing the economic value for communities around which we were developing activities' (M8, Female, Jordan, Project Staff)

Despite all efforts, the concept of transformative justice remains incomplete, because the real obstacles faced by communities have not been clearly addressed. There is also a gap between the criteria and figures demanded by donors and what communities actually need on the ground. This shows the importance of more flexible funding that keeps pace with ongoing changes. The programme focused on the idea of "social inclusion," such as allocating quotas for women and ensuring the participation of marginalised groups, but no clear framework of intersectionality was developed to link all

these issues together. Although the programme has helped to achieve a relative balance between social and environmental justice, political, economic, and structural barriers still stand in the way of achieving deeper and more impactful results. As a result, major reforms are needed to ensure that social justice is a fundamental part of day-to-day work, and not just a slogan used in programmes and projects.

Equity

Equality is closely linked to social justice, especially when viewed through an intersectional lens. It is important to distinguish between equality and equity: equality means treating everyone the same, while equity goes further by addressing the structural barriers that prevent marginalised groups from accessing resources and opportunities on equal terms with more privileged groups. In principle, the programme was based on equality and non-discrimination, ensuring that everyone, whether employees, partners, or beneficiaries, had the right to participate.

We made sure that everyone was eligible to participate, which I see as an act of social justice. Instead of taking the easy route, the staff took bold decisions that prioritised inclusion. The project design not only encouraged female participation, which is important since women are still often considered marginalised. We also worked to reach refugees, residents of a politically isolated area, and people with disabilities. (M6, Male, Palestine, Project Staff)

The programme took notable steps towards inclusion and fairness, but equality was not always matched with deeper equity. In some cases, the programme successfully adapted to local contexts and worked closely with communities, but overall, there was no strong framework to address all forms of marginalisation in a systematic way. For example, women's participation

was promoted, but often only in a very limited sense (giving microloans or focusing on cultural roles) without addressing the deeper issues such as patriarchy, social stereotypes, or the legacy of colonialism. This shows that realising true equity is not just about giving women or marginalised groups the opportunity to participate, but also about making major structural changes in laws, policies, and social systems.

Moreover, there was a tendency to view the empowerment of women or other groups as an economic lever rather than a social justice issue. In other words, the focus has been on increasing income or promoting entrepreneurship. While this is important, it can lead to the discussion of equity being reduced to mere numbers and economic projects, rather than addressing deep-rooted barriers such as gender or disability discrimination.

Accordingly, the programme can be said to have made progress in promoting equity, but it still needs a more sophisticated framework that explicitly incorporates an intersectional perspective and treats equity not simply as a superficial economic or social concept, but as a transformative process that distributes power and opportunity equitably between different groups.

Resilience and Resistance

Resilience and resistance are essential elements of work from an intersectional perspective, as they help us to understand how communities challenge and confront systems of power and oppression. Even in so-called "marginalised" places, we find that people do not simply accept reality, but resist the values, norms, and practices that constrain them. One of the strongest forms of resistance is collective action, where groups affected by oppression come together to change dominant ideas and create a different reality.

However, when policies or discourses define some groups as inherently "vulnerable" or "marginalised", they ignore the fact that reality is more complex: No one is a "perfect victim". This approach of pre-defined categories ignores the commonalities between different groups and their shared experiences of power, which weakens the possibility of building alliances that strengthen resistance. Therefore, projects need to understand the mechanisms and dynamics that communities use to increase their resilience to oppression and authoritarian injustice and consider them when designing and implementing interventions and activities when working with target groups.

We exist after 22 years because of this resistance and resilience. We are working to reach a common objective, without taking the shortest route. We work more than planned; you have to do this because we care about the community. They care about the environment and the Mediterranean, which is why they work there. They did work together. No, no one against another one. If we talk about the resources is a way to resist. (M7, Female, Italy, Project Staff)

So, this is kind of the objectives or activating the resistance and the resilience is not a main objective, but of course, by the meetings or engaging them and by the training, there was, like, you know. It enhances the resilience among the communities, especially the marginalised people. (M10, Female, Jordan, Project Staff)

However, when it came to the actual implementation of projects, a significant gap existed in understanding the meaning and importance of resilience and resistance, particularly among project staff from EU countries. One employee openly admitted this: 'To be honest, I don't have an answer to that. We did not really address this in any activity that we had. So we didn't come across anything that I can relate to this point' (M8, Female, Jordan, Project Staff).

This highlights that the concepts were often overlooked in practise. There were also clear differences in the perception of resilience and resistance in different regions. In the SWANA context, which is characterised by post-colonial realities, these concepts had a strong and positive meaning, that was closely linked to survival, dignity, and collective action. In contrast, the terms were viewed negatively by some staff from EU countries and associated with confrontation or instability, rather than as vital strategies for communities to cope with and overcome oppression.

This difference in understanding became even more evident in the Palestinian context. More than one staff member - from different countries - noted that resilience here is not just a general necessity, but a crucial condition for life itself. While countries across the Mediterranean face shared social, economic, and political challenges, in Palestine, there is an additional layer of difficulties that makes resilience not only relevant but also indispensable.

Resilience is especially relevant in the Palestinian context. Across the Mediterranean region, countries share some common challenges, social, economic, and even political. These challenges can sometimes overlap with those faced in European countries as well as in the Southern Mediterranean. But in Palestine, there is an added layer. The difficulties here require an even greater level of resilience compared to other contexts. (M6, Male, Palestine, Project Staff)

In conclusion, this chapter has shown that while the ENI CBC MED programme and its projects were concerned with principles of inclusion, equality and participation, intersectionality was rarely understood, explicitly named, or systematically integrated. For many staff, the term itself was unfamiliar, and its application was often accidental or intuitive rather than deliberate. Where intersectional principles were applied, for example: targeting women in rural areas, including mothers in community

meetings, or considering multiple levels of influence (micro, meso, and macro), these efforts were largely based on the initiative of individual staff rather than mandatory programme requirements.

The Mediterranean context underlines the urgency of an intersectional approach: a region characterised by contradictions between opportunity and exclusion, and by identities that change according to power, space, and time. Yet, despite this complexity, the programme often reduced diversity to simple categories such as 'women' or 'young people', overlooking the multi-layered oppression of disability, class, refugee status, or colonial history. In addition, rigid donor frameworks, strict timelines, and performance indicators often limited the ability to adapt flexibly to local circumstances.

In relation to the principles analysed, multi-level analysis, power, reflexivity, time and space, knowledge diversity, social justice, equity, and resilience, the results show both potential and limitations. Projects that incorporated participatory methods and local knowledge showed more inclusive and sustainable results, while projects that were primarily driven by administrative objectives risked reproducing hierarchies and excluding marginalised voices. Power relations, within communities, between partners, and towards the donor, remained central, and sometimes reinforced inequalities rather than reducing them.

Ultimately, intersectionality was an implicit practice rather than an explicit framework in this programme. To move forward, intersectionality needs to move from being incidental and optional to a deliberate, structured, and measurable dimension of programme design and implementation. Only then can initiatives in the Mediterranean move beyond superficial inclusion to transformative social justice that recognises the full complexity of human life.

CHAPTER SIX: RESULTS FROM THE INTERVIEWS WITH PROJECT STAFF: WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

Chapter Six presents the remaining results of the interviews with project staff, focusing on three main themes: firstly, the concept of women's empowerment within the ENI CBC MED programme, secondly, the issue of balancing the needs of local communities with the needs of donors in projects implemented under the umbrella of the programme, and finally the main stereotypes between the EU and SWANA regions.

Theme 5: Women's Empowerment

As mentioned in chapter two, in this research, women's empowerment is defined as a multidimensional process through which women gain the capacity and agency to shape their own lives and communities across political, cultural, social, and economic spheres. It involves not only access to resources and decision-making, but also recognition of women lived experiences and knowledge within their specific contexts. From an intersectional perspective, empowerment requires addressing overlapping structures of marginalisation, such as class, race, disability, or immigration status, which differently affect women's opportunities and constraints. Genuine empowerment is therefore not limited to formal inclusion or donor-driven objectives but emerges through approaches rooted in local realities and community ownership, ensuring that women's voices remain central to sustainable and transformative change.

Interview results show that the programme did not provide a specific definition of women's empowerment. During the interviews, each project offered its own definition based on the views of its staff. These definitions

ranged from traditional approaches to a more intersectional perspective. The following sections explain these differences in more detail.

First, some participants believed that women's empowerment was primarily based on liberation from structural discrimination and social constraints. They believed that women are capable of excellence and creativity, and believed that women's empowerment was when these constraints, which limit their freedom and affect their confidence and performance, are removed. They emphasised that achieving empowerment requires a direct confrontation with the prevailing discriminatory structure and a change in social structures, especially in societies where male dominance is still a deeply rooted tradition that grants men the "powerful" position due to social norms.

Women's empowerment can be achieved if women are freed from negative discrimination in society. She can feel more comfortable giving to excel if she's free to do what she believes she can do. What restricts, especially a woman in some societies, is all the negative discrimination in terms of access to work, especially holding decision-making positions (M2, Female, Tunisia, Project Staff).

Other participants pointed out that a number of mechanisms should be developed to empower women. These include considerations that contribute to the integration of women and ensure their increased participation in public life. For example, some projects have introduced mechanisms that target time and place, facilitating women's participation by addressing their social roles to increase their presence and empowerment. The concept of "Positive discrimination" was also highlighted as a mechanism that can help to empower women more effectively and quickly.

It's basically the adaptation of training so that we ensure women participation in the training in terms of timing, location, Online facilities and all of that So we made sure it's relevant, it's respectful to women's social Roles, and the

other thing is ensuring that the project sub-granting or the project Benefit goes and prioritises women where possible in a non-discriminative way, of course from in a positive discrimination. (M8, Female, Jordan, Project Staff)

Positive discrimination is generally preferential treatment given to someone based on a particular characteristic such as ethnicity, gender, religion, disability or any other detail that helps them receive better treatment, rather than focusing solely on their skills and competences. Although positive discrimination is illegal in many countries because it treats other applicants unfairly, many countries encourage practises that help to empower those who have fewer opportunities and greater barriers to equality. This approach is also often supported by project design, e.g. by prioritising or giving extra points to women-led projects to create a more equitable environment, as women are often doubly discriminated against.

This project focuses on the participation of women, specifically the gender aspect, and our findings as women and youth. For example, during the training, there is a condition to invite. For example, 50% of the participants will be pure women and the 50 other it be mixed youth traders, students and so on. The gender aspect was highly addressed in our project. (M10, Female, Jordan, Project Staff)

Some participants linked women's empowerment primarily to economic empowerment and felt that the provision of economic opportunities such as small grants and financial and technical support was the main gateway to women's independence and thus empowerment. However, even within this framework, there were different views. Some saw economic empowerment as a further step after providing equal opportunities and investing in women's skills and capabilities. They saw it as part of a wider system aimed at creating a social and psychological balance, in addition to a balance in the work environment and between private and professional life.

In the context of the project, empowerment was defined, first of all, as People being given equal and fair opportunities. Secondly, it was like investing in their capacity, I mean building the capacity of the participant, which was a major part of the project as we were offering a kind of technical support to those people and finally the financial support so this process of leaving nobody behind or to to exclude anybody to the empowerment notion of the project with favourable requirements or indicators to female participants. (M6, Male, Palestine, Project Staff)

Women's empowerment is giving access to financial and economic benefits with respect to both her social role as well, so empowering her to do her job as well as her social role in an equitable way, facilitating flexible hours, and facilitating Special needs. I refuse to push for the concept of women's equality where women need to do the same thing that a man does. I see women's empowerment through equity, where special cases are facilitated because societal and cultural norms have not yet changed. (M8, Female, Jordan, Project Staff)

One participant, on the other hand, took a simplistic and exaggerated view, believing that providing women with money would be enough to change their lives. She gave examples of women who invested small amounts of money in products that they described as nice and that met European standards, even if they did not necessarily have any real practical use. This approach demonstrates a certain naivety and a disregard for the complex reality of the challenges facing women's empowerment, particularly in its economic dimension.

Implication of the woman with small money, because this project gave some money to these people, and it was important, our beneficiaries have had some money to give to this, to this, to this people small, medium, enterprise especially in X country, we have gave a lot of small amount to many, many woman, So with this small amount, this woman have made a lot of things and

they produced a lot of things, A very interesting Which is the criteria of developed countries and societies. Perhaps these products aren't very. Aesthetic or very avant-garde, but they produced very, very Cute, but the most important thing was their activity and their ability to produce something. (M⁸, Female, EU, Project Staff)

In contrast, some participants demonstrated a deeper awareness of the concept of empowerment from an intersectional perspective, considering that women's empowerment is not a one-dimensional process, but rather a complex process in which gender intersects with other factors such as age, economic status, culture and social background. This understanding views empowerment as part of an interconnected network of structural and social constraints that women face, rather than as an isolated issue in itself.

According to this perspective, true empowerment is achieved when these systemic barriers are removed and women have the opportunity to participate in economic and social life without being separated from their culture or social role. Proponents of this approach also argue that culture and the social environment are not necessarily barriers, but rather essential elements in the formulation and realisation of the concept of empowerment. Therefore, empowerment here is based on recognising and supporting women's multiple identities through the provision of practical facilities that intersect with and respond effectively to these identities.

Women's empowerment starts from including them in the projects, knowing their needs, addressing their needs, meeting their demands, following things that make their life easy, so they can apply, making sure that you tackle different women from different governorates. And focus very carefully on the age as well - this is one of the best things about ENI CBC Med women; it has no age limitation. So, women over 40 who are really active and doing a lot

⁸⁸ For confidentiality pre-season the country of the interviewee will not be mentioned here.

can join. You have to focus on even if these are things that they are not aware of, you have to link them together. (M3, Female, Egypt, Project Staff)

The importance of involving men in women's empowerment activities was also emphasised. According to one participant, empowerment cannot be limited to women alone, because in order to achieve change, the power dynamic needs to be reshaped, which in turn requires a dialogue that includes both parties. From this perspective, empowering women also requires sensitising men and involving them in the change process aimed at improving women's lives. 'You can't empower women without empowering, educating, or opening the dimension of men. Aslo you have men who are empowering women, but maybe they are not taking the credit that they should take' M3.

One participant, on the other hand, rejected the notion of equality that ignores the unequal social burdens and instead argued in favour of the concept of "equality" based on the provision of facilities that take into account social roles, respect both men and women and their cultures, and understand their different contexts. For her, equality is the path to comprehensive, positive change that involves all parties and creates fairer relationships within society.

In addition, several participants pointed out that the empowerment of women is also linked to access to decision-making positions and leadership roles. The goal of this empowerment is not only participation, but also the creation of equal spaces within institutions where there are equal opportunities for access to resources and leadership positions, thus strengthening women's empowerment in a broader sense.

One of the main requirements was the participation of women, whether the enterprise is led by women, or at least they participate in it. So, I think this kind of condition made it like evidence that women had to be included in the project and fairly represented, so that was from the design of the project. (M6, Male, Palestine, Project Staff)

It was also discussed that access to decision-making positions alone is not enough. Rather, the environment must be supportive, as women may still face additional barriers once they have achieved them, requiring increased efforts to overcome these challenges.

Even if you hold the decision-making position, you are not very comfortable operating a good job because of the environment you work in. So, if you are truly free of all these negative, let's say, discriminations, I think you can be empowered and excel. (M2, Female, Tunisia, Project Staff).

One of the participants, whose project dealt with women in universities and academic institutions, also emphasised the importance of empowering women in academic institutions. The beneficiary noted that discrimination can occur even in supposedly equitable environments. Therefore, the presence of women in decision-making positions within these institutions remains essential and fundamental to ensuring equal opportunities and promoting true empowerment.

The academic environment is often seen as advanced, but this is not always true, as strong gender issues remain. If a space for innovation is built where everyone has equal access, acknowledgement of leadership, and the possibility to define their own pathway, it creates a benchmark of fair gender space. The creation of opportunities for entrepreneurship, self-empowerment, and transfer of knowledge into society, if well-established in academia and research institutions, can balance the lack of opportunities elsewhere. More than rebalancing, the aim was to create and test an open empowerment process, free of gender issues, where individuals are empowered regardless of gender. (M9, Male, Cyprus, Project Staff)

In this context, it appears that there was a group of women in leadership positions within the programme itself, either as programme managers or as representatives of their organisations within the programme

structure. This means that women were effectively involved in decision-making and in important decisions. This suggests that the internal structure of the programme was rather positive in terms of the representation of women in leadership positions.

They were women who were likely already empowered in their environments from both SWANA and EU countries, having reached very important positions in a traditionally masculine sector. Additionally, at the project level, they made significant contributions, as they had to make decisions regarding real changes at the city level, creating a new sequence in the city, informing citizens that the system was going to change and would be different. Doing new infrastructures, new equipment. It was a very big project. It was a strategic project making real changes... this could be inspiring. (M4, Female, Spain, Project Staff)

However, the presence of women in these positions does not necessarily mean that the programme performed comprehensively well in terms of women's empowerment, as women's empowerment encompasses several dimensions. The views of the project staff showed a discrepancy between looking at empowerment from a positive intersectional perspective and the traditional view. The lack of a clear definition of empowerment also contributed to this discrepancy, especially as in some cases the programme focused exclusively on meeting certain quantitative indicators without these indicators necessarily reflecting the actual reality on the ground. Therefore, the success of women's empowerment largely depended on how the project staff implemented these mechanisms in practise. 'It really depends on the project you are working on, because you can have a very affiliate project, but in terms of implementation, you will not have anything at all' (M2, Female, Tunisia, Project Staff)

Any project, such as one supported by the donor ENI CBC MED, is considered a women's empowerment initiative. Why? Because women in the Mediterranean are a little empowered. Unfortunately, until now, men have been the empowered persons in the family and the country. Let's talk about the mountains, the rural areas, the beneficiaries, where people need this kind of project, you know. (M11, Female, Lebanon, Project Staff)

Because women empower women, and sometimes women open doors for other women, because we understand each other's needs. (M3, Female, Egypt, Project Staff)

Theme 6: The Relationship Between the European Union and the Mediterranean Countries in Implementing the Programme.

Donor - Local Need Balance

One member of the project team noted that their project prioritised consultation with different governorates to gain a deeper understanding of local needs and perceptions. The needs assessment was tailored to each governorate, considering its specificities and requirements, so that the project could be better customised to local circumstances. Another participant noted that the project responded to these needs by providing support that strengthened cultural, social and economic incentives and helped communities, especially in rural areas, to create jobs and improve their living conditions based on their local realities. A third participant added that the project paid particular attention to listening to the most vulnerable groups within the community. He noted that many women and youth are actively involved in small-scale or vocational projects, often

centred on recycling or traditional crafts, reflecting authentic community-led economic activities.

One of the elements is the inclusion of community engagement, in order to design programmes that suited the requests, and that was implemented in every country that contributed to the project. For us, we had divided it per governorate, so we get the speciality of each governorate and the needs of each governorate separately. (M8, Female, Jordan, Project Staff)

The project was a significant support for the needs, as it enabled people to create jobs for themselves, even in rural areas. Due to the participatory approach employed in our project, numerous meetings were conducted to identify needs based on the survey results, which are presented in the survey. (M11, Female, Lebanon, Project Staff)

Let's say so, there was an understanding of the context, and an understanding of the needs, and how these needs could be structured into a programme, so it was easy to develop within this programme, our way. (M9, Male, Cyprus, Project Staff)

One participant noted that all EU-funded projects under the ENI CBC Med programme are driven by both donor priorities and the needs of local communities. These types of projects aim to either address an existing problem, introduce new ideas to solve the problem or promote certain principles and priorities. From this point of view, it saw a balance between the priorities of the donors, namely the EU, and the needs of the local communities, especially in terms of improving their living conditions by creating jobs and expanding the areas of economic participation. 'There were quite aligned the priorities of the programme and the interests of our producers, so we wanted to promote and make their businesses more competitive.' (M16, Male, Spain, Project Staff)

This kind of project solves a problem, disseminates an idea to solve a problem, or enhances or emphasises principles or priorities. So, of course, there was a balance between the priorities of the donors, which is what we are talking about, the EU and the needs of the local community, in terms of increasing or let's say enhancing their living conditions through creating jobs. (M10, Female, Jordan, Project Staff)

However, there were also diametrically opposed views arguing that the strict timeframes for projects hinder the fulfilment of local community priorities. Projects go through long and complex phases, from idea submission to approval, which can sometimes take almost two years, during which the needs of the community change significantly. Once implementation begins, the original idea may no longer be relevant, but the ability to change it is severely limited due to the strict financial and administrative regulations of the funder. Thus, the actual needs of the community are constantly changing, while the rigid rules do not allow sufficient flexibility to adapt activities or budgets to these changes.

The problem is the time frame; you write the proposal. By the time you get awarded, it's a long time, so it needs to change. So, no matter how prepared you are during the proposal writing phase, by the time you start implementation, there's a gap. (M8, Female, Jordan, Project Staff)

The project staff then advised revising the final concept before signing the contract and to consider it final only after the allocation of funds, taking into account any change in needs reflected in the work plan.

The donor has different priorities than any local community, yet when we bid for the standard, the donor has always had in mind that he wants to see the money spent return what he wants to check, namely the return on investment for the local community. (M11, Female, Lebanon, Project Staff)

Others pointed out that the European regulatory framework requires projects to adhere to predefined targets and key performance indicators (KPIs) set by donors, which can result in project prioritisation being out of step with local realities and limiting the ability to adapt to changing community needs. Some indicators exceeded the actual capacity of the project, while others were insignificant and did not reflect the actual impact on the community. Participants noted that the focus is often on finalising reports and filling in numbers rather than making a tangible and real impact on the lives of local beneficiaries.

There are boundaries because it has objectives that you must adhere to within them, which is a little bit complicated. The way these programmes are framing the KPIs, so it's in the logical framework, how you have to serve the achievement of certain KPIs, which are defined at the stage where this might be quite theoretical, or it might not be suitable for different interpretations of the programme? (M9, Male, Cyprus, Project Staff)

In other cases, as some project staff have pointed out, the projects are designed to solve local problems, but they are conceived from the perspective of the donor and are not based on a thorough diagnosis of the needs of the population. Often, the projects serve the donor's agenda, such as promoting economic growth, sustainability or job creation, and these goals are sometimes linked to community needs in contrived or unrealistic ways, which can diminish their relevance and real impact on the local context.

One of the biggest challenges is that projects often automatically require the support of local authorities, but ministries and government agencies rarely follow up on these projects or integrate them into real development policy. This weakens their impact and reflects a lack of coordination between the political level (donors and the European Union) and the needs of local communities. One participant explained that donors set ambitious priorities and

demand tangible impact within a short project duration without providing actual institutional support. Meanwhile, ministries and regional levels are not interested in or even aware of the details of these projects. As a result, the biggest burden falls on the implementation teams trying to balance the demands of donors and the needs of local communities. Meanwhile, elected bodies and official institutions in Europe are far from understanding the actual impact of these projects. The focus is often limited to formal indicators such as the number of beneficiaries or solutions provided, without taking a closer look at the contribution of the local community or the sustainability of the results.

The other side is difficult. I mean to balance. I mean this because sometimes we are too ambitious. The priorities of donors and their need to impact. A very short time, because the lifetime span of the project is very short. And they are not supportive first of all, from their institutional level, so the regional level, the ministry level are not really concerned about what the projects are doing, as they are not aware of the projects. (M7, Female, Italy, Project Staff)

Participants also pointed out that the weak interaction of donors with the situation on the ground exacerbates this problem, as donors rarely visit implementation sites or monitor activities directly, which obscures a true picture of local needs and daily challenges. It was suggested that donors should visit selected samples of projects to understand what is actually happening on the ground and adjust their approaches accordingly. However, some participants explained that this dimension is more related to high-level policy than to implementation on the ground, as recommendations are usually presented to the European Commission without it being clear how they will translate into practical changes in policy or priorities. Although projects under the ENI CBC programme are originally designed to balance donor priorities with the needs of local communities - such as improving living conditions and creating jobs - the lack of direct contact between the donor and the field is an

obstacle to achieving this balance, and a noticeable one at that. 'The policy was something that was elevated to the European Commission. However, we don't know what the European Commission does with those deliverables and recommendations' (M1, Female, France, Project Staff).

On the other hand, some staff mentioned some cases where the local community proved able to adapt to the donors' requirements, especially in areas previously involved in international projects. The community, especially the women, were very adept at communicating and dealing with the donors. The projects were implemented in a way that respected the local cultural context. This was due to the experience and prior training of the community, not necessarily the flexibility of the donors themselves. Again, it is important to remember that intensive funding over time can play an important role in training the local community to report in a language that the donor wants to hear, regardless of the importance of the contributions and the actual results.

I want to mention that this Community is very open-minded. They have a woman who really knew how to deal. With the donors, with the international organisation, because they, you know, had a lot of training, a lot of projects that were funded by the international organisation and implemented by an international organisation like GIZ, also the EU from 2010, especially. In the Syrian refugee crisis, they know how to deal with such projects, especially the training of Community engagement and so on. So yeah, it was very aligned with the culture. (M10, Female, Jordan, Project Staff)

Lastly, participatory processes have also been found to be an effective tool for bridging the gap between donors and the community. Meetings between different stakeholders, such as municipalities, associations and citizens, helped to establish a relative balance between donor priorities and community needs. However, these initiatives were the result of the efforts of

the implementation teams rather than a flexible strategy or direct support from the donor itself.

Participatory processes are a good way to find a balance among all those dynamics when convening a meeting. A group of different kinds of actors and all of them are sitting on the same table and talking about sharing their perspectives and needs, and they find ways of collaborating. I think it's a good way of finding a balance among all those dynamics. (M13, Male, Spain, Project Staff)

The project staff emphasised that the success of the projects depends not only on European funding or written plans, but also on the local communities' feeling that the project belongs to them, "*community ownership*". When people feel that an idea stems from their real needs, they actively participate in the project and continue to support it even after the funding has ended. This sense of ownership makes initiatives more relevant, effective, and sustainable, as the community itself becomes the driving force behind the project's success.

One participant described the community as "the body of the project", meaning that any project that is not deeply rooted in the community will remain superficial and will not bring about significant change. From this perspective, the role of the EU should be to provide a regulatory and supportive framework, while the heart and substance of the project come from the people themselves. In this way, the projects are not only tied to the donor but are also sustainable because they live on in the community even after the programme has ended.

Everything was done in the community. There was nothing floating, so spaces were in real spaces in the real world, and people were all the people around us. Therefore, it's a matter of the project leader's and partners' mindset. If you are used to working in real life. This is not a problem, so the answer to how

the project balances is that there is a good balance. If you are, you know the programme and you are a good project designer, so you fit into the programme, but then your heart is in the community. So if the project design is embodied in the community, you know the community is the body of the project. And then within this, let's say constraints, you stay with the community, and you work with the community. So somehow, you create an interface, and you say I will serve the programme because I'm creating this number of actions. I'm delivering this number of start-ups, or I'm creating leverage for additional funding from others, donors, or other funders. But this is done in a strong embodiment of the project in the community. (M9, Male, Cyprus, Project Staff)

Funded Programmes in the Mediterranean: Power Dynamics, Stereotypes, and Challenges:

Overall, the programme witnessed significant collaboration between the project staff and the partner teams from different countries. In most of the interviews, participants mentioned the positive atmosphere and the genuine co-operation between the team members, both from the Northern and Southern Mediterranean countries. They also emphasised that this project was one of the most positive in terms of cooperation and division of power between team members, which helped to strengthen the spirit of teamwork and effectively achieve the project objectives.

Some staff members also noted in interviews that the programme itself helped to improve understanding and cooperation among team members and to significantly reduce previous stereotypes about "second countries". This was particularly evident among staff from European countries in relation to countries in the SWANA region, whether in terms of work performance and quality or the cultures of the societies and the status of women within these

societies, among other stereotypes. The actual and realistic collaboration has allowed these stereotypes to be re-evaluated and a more accurate and realistic understanding of local capabilities and different cultures to be built. It has also helped to teach Europeans new methods for dealing with the challenges that Europe will face in the near future and that the Southern Mediterranean region is currently facing, such as climate change and others. 'South has the knowledge, I mean, they will know new things, and they will also face other problems, like, for example, you know that environmental issues or climate change are more important in the south'. (M7, Female, Italy, Project Staff)

Despite all the above-mentioned to promote co-operation and reduce stereotypes, there were exceptional cases that showed the persistence of certain stereotypes, especially colonial and white supremacist. For example, one staff member expressed opinions based on these stereotypes by ranking the countries they had worked with from worst to best in a very patronising way, putting Arab countries at the bottom of the list and European countries at the top. She also made condescending statements and ideas toward others during the interview.

Another case which has already been mentioned concerned a staff member who came from a North African country and worked in a European country. She was subjected to discrimination by her colleagues in the organisation who took advantage of her in the project. They also had racist views towards their non-European partners. This was reflected in their refusal to travel to these countries, or in the negative descriptions they gave about them, or even in slips of the tongue, "lapsus" about colleagues from non-European countries. This had a significant impact on their health and psyche during the project period.

When you feel more pressure, more discrimination. It's a matter of difficulties. Despite the project being on, there were difficulties with

everything, and it was also on my mind. My own health was affected, and I was sick many times because of this pressure. I was sick because I feel that they don't trust me, or they don't feel comfortable with me or they. How to say they were also surprised by the good results... It was related to many things. It was related to my origin. It was related to they are not being confident in their capacity, whether I can do it or not, and also, how to say it; they don't understand many things... In Europe, they feel somehow not equal to the other, superior, more with a big history, better knowledge, good quality of education and so on. (M⁹, Female, EU, Project Staff).

ENI CBC MED Performance

The interview results reflect many of the positive practises used by the programme to promote intersectionality. Many of the interviewees noted that the programme is very well designed, as it is based on projects implemented through the cooperation between multiple countries working together on a common cause, and implemented through local partners in each country. The programme is also decentralised to a certain extent, as the head office is located in Sardinia and not in Brussels. One speaker also noted that the ENI CBC Med programme has a solid understanding of inequality, but does not address it directly or superficially; instead, it addresses it as part of a complex framework with several interconnected factors. In his opinion, the programme is aware of the concept of resistance, change and resilience and takes a systemic approach rather than addressing a single dimension. For example, water, energy, food and the environment are linked together in a single framework.

I think that the background of ENI CBC Med is ready. It is not built in an explicit way, so there is a more traditional way of addressing the inequalities,

⁹ For confidentiality reasons the country of this interviewee will not be mentioned)

but not as a complex of factors, but as I think that the programme is assuming complexity as a Framework. So that. I think that whoever wrote the programme is aware of the dynamics of transition and also the dynamics of resistance and resilience of systems against change, and so on. (M9, Male, Cyprus, Project Staff)

The programme was also a good model for the integration of social contexts. Many interviewees pointed to the flexibility and freedom to shape interventions to meet the needs of local communities. In this respect, many of the examples already mentioned in this research showed practices that took into account the social and economic context of the beneficiaries.

The way I try to make plans is that I don't want to make the project design A cage for the implementation. I don't like to be so descriptive and so detailed that, when you know, implementing what I wrote is becoming a way to reduce the impact. Because sometimes you know you are creating your cages. (M9, Male, Cyprus, Project Staff)

The programme has also shown what strategies for integrating local communities look like in practice, as many of the projects implemented had strategies that involved local communities in the projects from the very beginning, and inputs were developed based on their needs and context, and they were involved in the decision-making process regarding the core solutions to the problems they face.

If you include the individual from the first phase, from the very first, from the initial phase of your process, it would be very much easier for them to adopt the technologies and the solutions you are providing and you will, let's say, reduce the risks for resistance. And I think in here it's very, very it was a successful experience for us because the decision maker, let's say of the university at least, who will adopt these solutions at the end if he was or she was Involved since the very first phase of the project, so everything was

designed based on their needs based on their priorities and based on you know, Let's say, facts or key figures that everyone agreed on since the beginning, and this really makes it very much easier implementation and the adoption and even the replication of the of the solutions after the project ends. (M2, Female, Tunisia, Project Staff)

The programme has also developed very positively in terms of cooperation between the partners and the exchange of knowledge between the different countries on both sides of the Mediterranean. It has been a positive model for co-operation in developing interventions to solve common problems. It also promoted fairness in funding through the 50/50 rule, where the North's share could not exceed 50%, while the South's share could be higher. This rule positively contributed to investment in projects implemented in the South, as opposed to the traditional funding method where the donor country receives the majority of the project budget, to the detriment of the implementation of activities in local communities.

Finally, the programme took an approach that built on previous successes and used the successes of some projects to develop new interventions or extend them over longer periods of time by opening up special funding opportunities for projects that build on previous experience. This approach improved the chances of sustainable results and gave local communities a broader scope to achieve real and tangible impact beyond the short-term effects of individual initiatives.

Weakness of the programme

The weak aspect of the project is that despite the occurrence of some intersectional practises in the implemented projects and despite the very good programme design, which is considered progressive compared to other similar programmes, a comprehensive intersectional perspective was lacking and the

practice of intersectionality was left to the project managers. There were no strategies to promote intersectionality through the programme itself that could be transferred to the projects. There were also no initiatives or training to raise awareness of the importance of intersectionality in the projects. 'I mean, we have so much problem in the implementation of the project. So, they add an additional thing by complicating the reporting and so on' (M2, Female, Tunisia, Project Staff). repeating

Furthermore, the bureaucracy in the programmes was very intensive and the review process was very lengthy and tedious. More than one person from the project staff pointed out that the number of reports sometimes required more work than the project activities themselves. This was not only exhausting but also excluded any institution that was not well established because it simply could not fulfil all the bureaucratic and financial requirements demanded by the programme, such as the deposit of a high financial guarantee in the case of a leading partner or the large number of supporting documents required by the programme. This bureaucratic procedure prevents organisations that do not have a strong administrative and financial capacity from participating in the programme. This is particularly critical for small and local organisations, which are usually located in marginalised areas and have a direct link and deep understanding of the most vulnerable groups.

I asked them if they want to submit and they say not because I know because In fact, if I don't know if you were in this was before in this programme, the programme is really difficult and I have this audit with the programme and I talk to the auditor that your programme was so difficult that I don't think that I will submit another project in your programme. Because we spend all our time doing reporting, we don't have time doing activity. We need to have a double human resource on the project. You can, we cannot pay them with the project funding, I mean or fund, and you ask us to do a lot of things. (M2, Female, Tunisia, Project Staff)

Although the programme has shown good performance in the areas of understanding the social and economic context and integrating local communities, the time lag between the submission of the proposal and the actual start of funding is very long, which may result in the needs of the community itself changing. Unfortunately, it is not possible to change the project design during this time, so the interventions do not function optimally.

In addition, the pre-determined budget and the lack of flexibility to change funding items during project implementation for activities may result in the actual needs of beneficiaries in local communities not being met. This is not only due to budget deficits, but also to the limited flexibility in budget and financing items.

Sometimes when you develop the project, you have a budget to develop certain activities and sometimes you identify needs of the local communities that You can't cover because you don't have budgets for this, so sometimes, you see that of course the activities are well, well designed and Are interesting for the beneficiaries, but there is some other that the project can't cover that. Also, maybe improve or provide more benefits to the beneficiaries in various stressful ways. (M13, Male, Spain, Project Staff)

There was also a lack of understanding of the political and colonial context in the region. Political and historical colonialism and its ongoing legacy are fundamental to the dynamics of social and economic change in the region. Ignoring this dimension increases the risk that interventions will be superficial or disconnected from the roots of the real challenges faced by local communities.

I had the feeling that they really don't understand the context of the other countries, so maybe more research on the situation of the other countries for specific topics specific industries would help design projects in a in a way that addresses the needs rather than just touch touching the tip of the iceberg as

they say, it's any real issues need to be addressed rather than just doing a research there, training here and training there which might be lost after the project. (M8, Female, Jordan, Project Staff)

Despite these weaknesses, most participants consider the programme much better than others in these aspects, stating that most other European Union projects are much worse in understanding the social and economic context, improving cooperation, or adopting sufficient flexibility. Some mentioned that the lack of decentralisation contributes to this positive evaluation.

For example, under EU funds, there were many requests related to energy, but very few concerning water. The main gap was in the knowledge of the institutions at the European level. This programme covers the entire Mediterranean region, where water is a critical issue in many areas. Europe has now recognised this problem, and for this reason, this programme is the first to invest significantly in water-related projects. (M7, Female, Italy, Project Staff)

One project staff pointed out that the comparison of ENI CBC Med with other programmes reveals a fundamental difference in approach. Most other programmes often address issues of inequality superficially by collecting numbers or telling single, disparate stories, thereby limiting themselves to "discrete stories" without developing a comprehensive vision or radical solutions. In contrast, ENI CBC Med has sought to go beyond this approach by allowing a deeper understanding of the challenges and an exploration of the possibility of real, complex change. 'In general, in this work of surveying the programmes, I had this feeling that ENI CBC Med is advanced'. (M9, Male, Cyprus, Project Staff)

It was also pointed out that the ENI CBC Med programme should build a new vision of the world that connects different experiences in a broader framework, rather than limiting the issue of inequality to mere numbers or isolated individual stories. The main criticism at this point is that focusing exclusively on individual rights and personal freedoms does not solve the problem, as it perpetuates the same old narrative that reinforces discrimination. This needs to happen on two levels: The first is the realistic design and implementation of projects that really make a difference, and the second is the intellectual level that determines what kind of change and innovation is needed. There are also important questions: do the projects actually make a difference? Have they encountered resistance or political pressure that reduces their impact? Are they targeting the right groups?

Moreover, these questions are becoming increasingly urgent at this point in time, especially after the shifts in international funding dynamics following the Trump administration's decision to stop funding the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which has fundamentally changed the funding landscape regionally and globally.

The economic level actors need to be ready for a change. But the problems that the institutional level is not clear in this historical moment, where the USA are changing all the rules on the table. And so, all these aspects create uncertainty that makes it known to economic actors, who are hesitant to invest. Again, these are problems that are not related to the rate of the project, but rather they are asking the project to do what is essential at the local level.
(M7, Female, Italy, Project Staff)

In conclusion, this chapter addressed three main themes: the concept of women's empowerment, the balance between local community needs and donor requirements, and stereotypes between the EU and the SWANA region. Regarding women's empowerment, the interviews revealed a variety of

definitions, ranging from traditional approaches to intersectional perspectives. For some participants, empowerment meant freeing women from social constraints and providing only economic support, while others focussed on providing economic opportunities, financial and technical support, taking into account the cultural and social context of women and involving men in the change process in order to achieve a sustainable impact.

Regarding the balance between local community needs and donor requirements, participants explained that projects often try to match EU objectives with local community needs through prior community assessments and responses to socio-economic needs. However, they pointed out that strict timelines and financial and administrative regulations limit the ability of projects to adapt to the ever-changing needs of communities, and that the lack of direct donor contact with the field hinders the achievement of real balance. Participatory processes and a sense of community ownership play an important role in project success.

Finally, the results have shown that the ENI CBC MED programme has performed well compared to other EU programmes in terms of cooperation between partners, understanding of the socio-economic context, the application of some intersectional practises and the provision of funding in an equitable manner between the North and the South of the Mediterranean. However, weaknesses remain, notably the lack of a comprehensive strategy to promote intersectionality, complex bureaucratic procedures, a lack of flexibility in adapting projects and budgets, and a lack of political and historical understanding of the region. Despite these challenges, the participants considered the programme to be a progressive model for launching sustainable and effective projects in the region.

CHAPTER SEVEN: RESULTS FROM THE INTERVIEWS WITH PROJECT BENEFICIARIES: BENEFICIARIES' POINT OF VIEW

This chapter presents the results of interviews with seven beneficiaries from the 12 projects whose staff were interviewed and whose opinions were analysed in previous chapters. It aims to present the views of end beneficiaries from local communities. These views are compared with those of project staff to increase the reliability of the interview data. The chapter includes a comparison between the perspectives of project staff and end beneficiaries from local communities. As in previous chapters, it covers the following topics: understanding context; social, cultural, economic and political aspects; intersectionality and its principles; and women's empowerment. To maintain confidentiality and protect the identity of interviewees, all quotations in this chapter refer only to the broader region (SWANA or EU), rather than the participant's specific country.

The interviews with beneficiaries revealed important insights that both complement and, in some cases, challenge the perspectives of project staff. Beneficiaries were particularly attentive to the lack of cultural considerations in the projects and were more openly critical of the limited engagement with the broader political context in which interventions were implemented. Another finding was the emergence of what might be described as “donor-savvy communities.” Some beneficiaries with prior project experience had learned to adapt to donor requirements by framing their needs and activities in ways that aligned with external expectations. While this demonstrates resilience and adaptability, it also raises questions about the authenticity of participation and the risk of reinforcing dependency on donor discourse rather than fostering genuine empowerment.

Regarding women's empowerment, some beneficiaries echoed the observation made in Chapters One and Two that the concept has become an NGO-driven term, often detached from local realities. One confirmed that the word "gender" itself has become stigmatised in certain community contexts, making inclusion and trust-building more acceptable and effective entry points for meaningful change. All these themes will be explored in greater detail throughout this chapter.

Understanding The Context

The opinions of the beneficiaries differed widely. Some found the project's performance very good as it responded to the local community context and addressed the local communities' issues and problems with a real understanding of the community's needs. More than one beneficiary also stated that the programme understood the context better than other EU programmes and responded to real local needs. 'I think the programme addresses local issues by targeting proposals that offer real-world problems, and it's the only EU funding instrument that allows hardware' (B6, Male, EU, Project beneficiary).

It was discussed that a number of methods were used to understand the needs of the community, such as conducting a needs assessment or meeting with the local community. However, some beneficiaries pointed out that the project and its objectives were planned in advance without taking into account the reality and needs of the local communities. In addition, certain groups were targeted, which sometimes did not correspond to reality. For example, targeting the age group of 18 to 25-year-olds, who are normally in schools and universities or participants over fifty were being excluded, even though the beneficiaries felt that women over fifty are more likely to become social

experts. The result is that this energy and social expertise are wasted and excluded from making a real and lasting impact in local communities.

‘Honestly, the plans are made by the donors, with specific goals, targets and items and where everything is to be spent, and this has a negative impact on society’ (B7, Female, SWANA, Project beneficiary)

Lastly, in one of the interviews, it was noted that a beneficiary from a target community, who had participated in several donor-funded initiatives, had become so familiar with donor expectations that she was able to reproduce almost verbatim the answers and narratives typically sought by donors. While this demonstrates that local actors are able to skilfully navigate the international funding framework, it also raises concerns that community voices may be shaped by donor-driven discourse rather than expressing their authentic priorities and need .

Social Context:

In general, the focus of the programme's projects on social aspects was praised. For example, one beneficiary highlighted the role that the programme played in creating employment opportunities for women in socially accepted areas without them having to travel, as the conservative culture of the population only allows certain types of work, and without mixing. She also pointed out that all interventions were designed to be compatible with the environment and social relations within that environment, and that they helped to bring about positive, real, and sustainable change.

There was never an attempt to change the culture, on the contrary, it was respected. For example, women were not allowed to leave the village or go out after sunset, so activities were organised within the village. Also, women are not allowed to be out of the house for more than three hours, so the

number of training days was increased, and each session was limited to three hours. For the sewing classes, that could not be organised within the village, the women were picked up by car, accompanied by a man from the village, usually the husband of one of the participants ... The women don't refuse the change, but they need it to be customised to their reality. (B4, Female, SWANA, Project beneficiary)

Another beneficiary noted that the project managers really listened to the local communities and their social context before starting an intervention. Another beneficiary also mentioned that the communities on both sides of the Mediterranean have a similar culture and similar problems and challenges, and that the programme tries to respect these and solve them in the local context of each community. At the same time, some participants differentiated between the social and cultural aspects and noted that the performance of the project varied, with the social aspect receiving more attention than the cultural aspect. 'Both social and economic, yes, were considered, but political and cultural, I am not sure' (B6, Male, EU, Project beneficiary)

One participant disagreed with this statement, noting that the programme's support for her pioneering initiatives, which focus primarily on preserving and documenting local culture, has helped her to preserve her identity and the culture of her community, which continues to suffer from colonialism that seeks to erase her identity and culture.

Finally, another participant noted that although the social and cultural context was considered, it fell short of an intersectional perspective. 'There is a big aspect of the context in general. But the programme is so far away from the intersectional way' (B2, Female, EU, Project beneficiary).

Political Context:

All beneficiaries indicated that the programme paid little attention to the political context of local communities, while some indicated that it paid no attention at all. Others pointed to some minor considerations that did not reach the required level, such as flexibility in moving activities online in the event of an outbreak of war in one of the target areas. However, a number of beneficiaries pointed out that they cannot say that the programme takes into account the political context if they are not able to take positive and serious action with regard to what is currently happening in the world and in the Mediterranean. They also stated that everything that is currently happening in the region is on a very significant and dangerous scale that nobody is talking about, neither from the European Union nor from the programme.

When we talk about Palestine, we talk about intersectionality. Israel should not be included in the programme. The programme should not be silent about what is happening now. It's about inequality and privilege. The programme is closing its eyes to what is happening and still giving money. (B2, Female, EU, Project beneficiary)

The main criticism concerns the allocation of EU funds, including this programme, to countries such as Israel without considering the political situation. On one hand, the programme promotes ideals such as cooperation, sustainability, and a green transition in the Mediterranean region. On the other hand, by including Israel as a partner, the EU is seen as ignoring or even legitimising policies and practices that contradict these values, particularly regarding the occupation of Palestine.

One beneficiary goes further, noting that EU cooperation programmes are not only technical or financial, but inherently political. By continuing to involve and support Israel, the EU is effectively taking a political stance that encourages or normalises Israel's involvement despite the ongoing conflict. In the speaker's view, this undermines the entire purpose of the programme:

whatever positive measures are implemented (inclusion, green initiatives, cooperation) become meaningless because they are based on a political contradiction.

Economic Context:

In stark contrast to the programme's poor performance in addressing the political context, the programme understood the economic reality of local communities very well. Most beneficiaries acknowledged that the programme was successful in the interventions proposed to improve the economic conditions of the programme's final beneficiaries, as these were formulated in line with the needs of the local communities and tailored to their specific needs. 'Economic situation was taken into consideration because after the 2008 economic crisis, most MED countries suffered' (B3, Female, EU, Project beneficiary)

For example, one of the beneficiaries referred to the village targeted by the project, a village from which many men had migrated due to poverty and lack of economic activity. She explained how the programme helped the women to find resources that suited their reality and context, as well as applicable economic activities in the village, that ensured sustainability even after the project ended. She also explained how this helped to maintain the demographics and develop the economic system within the village. 'The project has made a significant difference to the women's lives. They learnt useful skills that helped them to develop, and it was also economically beneficial' (B4, Female, SWANA, Project beneficiary).

Speaking about sustainability and its importance, one of the beneficiaries pointed out that the programme only partially takes into account the economic context, as sustainability is an essential component and its

absence is an essential part of the assessment of the role of the programme. It is not enough that the programme carries out effective economic interventions, but it is also important that there is something that guarantees the continuity and sustainability of these interventions in order to improve the economic conditions of local communities. 'I think the sustainability of these projects, and good practices, not activities but something structural' (B5, Female, EU, Project beneficiary).

Intersectionality Implication and Principles:

Almost half of the beneficiaries stated that they were familiar with the concept of intersectionality and knew what it meant, but at the same time, they stated that there was no intersectional perspective in the projects implemented by the programme. Intersectionality is not limited to giving women a platform to express themselves or to integrate women and their participation in public life. Rather, it is a complex framework that explores how intersecting systems of oppression (gender, ethnicity, class, ability, etc.) shape people's experiences. These programmes often talk about "inclusion" and "diversity" but do not take the real structural steps needed to reduce inequalities.

I am hearing people using this word more, we are not even close to having it in any programme when people use it, but they don't really know what it exactly means... no one cares about people who are most marginalised. They are writing about changing inclusion diversity on the website and using language, but the perspective, not really. The step behind is missing, and this does not mean intersectionality. I see it as part of pinkwashing. (B2, Female, EU, Project beneficiary)

There were attempts at social inclusion and an attempt to reach out to marginalised communities. This was recognised by the beneficiaries. For

example, one participant commented that the project understood that older women in the target community are more respected and have more power than younger women, especially those who didn't have access to education. This was considered when designing the programme to be inclusive. Some projects also focused on including marginalised social classes or geographical locations of the target community.

I think they were focused on the most marginalised people, and they were well-integrated, but I am sure there is a big margin for improvement. It would be perfect if the marginalised people could be engaged in the decision-making process. (B5, Female, EU, Project beneficiary)

Several principles of intersectionality were mentioned that the programme addresses from the beneficiaries' perspective, including social justice. They stated that this was one of the pillars of the programme and that money is allocated to projects that address these issues. There was a good performance in terms of this principle, especially when it came to contributing to greater economic justice. 'Social inclusion was considered because local communities were involved and included disadvantaged people' (B3, Female, EU, Project beneficiary).

One of the beneficiaries also mentioned that ENI CBC MED strengthens the resilience of the beneficiaries, and that the project coordinator has analysed the challenges well. However, some other beneficiaries disagree with this statement and believe that the resilience of the local community was not really considered in the implementation of these projects

Regarding the principle of knowledge diversity, beneficiaries' perspectives vary considerably depending on the project topic, target group, and project team. For example, one beneficiary noted that she participated in a project primarily targeting highly educated individuals, but which also sought

to include other voices through public meetings and to bring together perspectives from different sectors of the community. Another beneficiary highlighted that the way projects are written significantly affects whether knowledge diversity is truly integrated, as there are no clear considerations for this at the programme level. 'It's up to the coordinator to generate real impact' (B6, Male, EU, Project beneficiary).

However, another participant mentioned that her own knowledge was welcomed and regarded as essential to the work. Another beneficiary recounted her experience with the local community, which was initially hesitant and unsure about the project, as they were uncertain whether it would benefit them. Over time, as the project respected them and their knowledge and built upon it, trust began to develop. Once this trust was established, the community started to open to the project team, leading to genuine knowledge sharing and collaborative work. 'Things can be done better when integrating people in the solutions' (B5, Female, EU, Project beneficiary).

Furthermore, there was a discrepancy in the attention paid to power dynamics between the programme and project levels. More than one beneficiary stated that power dynamics were not considered at the programme level. At the project level, performance is better, as the dynamics are understood and analysed, for example, by identifying the powerful actors in the community and determining how to work with them to achieve the project's goals and integrate everyone.

Women Empowerment

More than one beneficiary represented a white - feminist understanding of the concept of women's empowerment, neglecting and sometimes criticising women of other ethnicities. One beneficiary blamed

refugee woman for the lack of economic opportunities in her community, while another described the lives of women in other Mediterranean countries in stereotypical and racist terms. This suggests that the mentality of the white saviour still exists, which aims to protect "these dark-skinned women"

On the other hand, one beneficiary pointed out the very negative image and stigma associated with the word gender in her community. She believes that this is because the programmes generally do not take an intersectional perspective and do not understand the environment in which the projects are implemented.

The word “gender” should not be mentioned. If you want the project to be successful, people will perceive it as a Western-led administration imposing its societal values. It has become a major issue and is rejected by almost everyone, even intellectual and simple-minded individuals. (B7, Female, SWANA, Project beneficiary)

Several beneficiaries pointed out that, in their opinion, the concept of women’s empowerment in the programme is characterised by an “NGO-ised” approach. They stated that the focus was on the repeated mention of the term empowerment rather than on how it can be meaningfully implemented in practise. Even at project level, according to one beneficiary, the focus seems to be on what the programme offers rather than on the actual objectives. The provision of transport or food allowances, for example, was seen as a way of increasing satisfaction, but not necessarily as a genuine contribution to empowerment. ‘What a programme is expecting from the applicant in the proposal is not enough. It’s not enough to ask how you will include gender equality in your project in X number of characters’ (B2, Female, EU, Project beneficiary)

Finally, the beneficiaries mention a few things that could pose a challenge when implementing intersectionality in the projects:

One of the main challenges in implementing intersectionality in funded programmes is how to introduce new interventions and bring about positive change without changing the local culture. Beneficiaries also emphasised the importance of raising awareness of diversity and integrating all people, especially women, equally, taking into account factors such as socio-economic class, religion, geographical distance, age, origin, and refugee status, if any. They also emphasised the understanding that discrimination can lead to violence and that all forms of oppression and privilege must be analysed and addressed in any diversity-related intervention.

As the term "intersectionality" is increasingly used, a new challenge is to recognise that it is not simply an item to tick off a to-do list, but rather a framework for understanding how categories and identities intersect and shape privilege or forms of marginalisation. This needs to be taken seriously when designing programmes. Although implementation is complex due to the multitude of factors that need to be considered, flexibility in project implementation is crucial as it allows work to be adapted to local circumstances. In this context, local associations play a crucial role in helping donors to work in a more realistic and inclusive way. These associations have a deeper understanding of the community context and can ensure an intersectional and effective approach.

Staff vs. Beneficiaries' Points of View

As far as the local context, similar findings emerged from the staff and beneficiary interviews. The results from both sides showed differences in the

degree of contextualised attention given to local issues. Interestingly, the project managers who showed a genuine interest in understanding the local context and explaining the mechanisms by which it was integrated were the most likely to apply the principles of intersectionality in a concrete way. Beneficiaries of their projects expressed satisfaction when they felt that their needs and realities were taken into account, and project outcomes in these cases were more positive than in projects where project managers did not emphasise the importance of the local context as a key element. Some beneficiaries of those projects pointed out shortcomings of the programme regarding the inclusion of the local context, as they felt that the projects were presented in a generalised way without sufficient connection to their reality. It is also worth mentioning that one beneficiary, who lives in an area where donor intervention is frequent, started to use the same language expected from donors to the point that her responses were more in line with what she had heard and repeated as part of the NGO's work logic, rather than reflecting her actual needs.

In terms of social context, there was some consensus between staff and beneficiaries. Both parties felt that projects that took the social context into account achieved more positive results. In these cases, beneficiaries expressed satisfaction and emphasised the importance of this dimension. However, there was disagreement regarding the cultural context. While staff saw the social and cultural contexts as largely interlinked, some beneficiaries made a clear distinction between them. They pointed out that the programme took social aspects more into account than cultural ones, and that there were weaknesses in incorporating cultural considerations specific to some local communities into project design and implementation.

Regarding the political context, there was a clear and significant difference between the views of project staff and beneficiaries. The views of

the beneficiaries were more critical and negative, with feelings of anger and loss of confidence in the effectiveness of the programme, due to the lack of consideration of the political context. The problem is not limited to the local political context of the communities, but in particular to the handling of regional events that affect the communities. The current war in Gaza, for example, has angered many beneficiaries, who consider the projects pointless. The reason for this is the programme's silence and failure to comment or make a statement on the massacres taking place there, as well as the continued funding of Israel as one of the countries entitled to programme funds. While some project staff pointed to this problem, the sentiment of beneficiaries was more pronounced and strident, reflecting a significant gap between the expectations of the local community and the programme's response to the political context.

As far as the economic context is concerned, there was a broad consensus between the project staff and the beneficiaries about the programme's performance. Both sides praised the successful engagement with the economic context, the efforts to improve the economic situation of the local communities, and the successfully implemented interventions. The main difference was that the beneficiaries emphasised sustainability. They felt that the success of projects is measured by their ability to further strengthen the economic situation and ensure its sustainability after the end of the programme, a dimension that was not as strongly reflected in the evaluation by the project staff.

In relation to intersectionality, beneficiaries were found to have a higher level of knowledge and understanding of the concept than staff. For example, about half of the beneficiaries knew and understood the meaning of the term, while the percentage was lower among staff. This could be the reason why the beneficiaries' evaluation of the programme was more critical and

negative regarding the integration of intersectionality. They pointed out the lack of practical application and openly criticised the programme, highlighting the problems resulting from the insufficient application of the principles of intersectionality.

Regarding the principles, of intersectionality, the beneficiaries mentioned the principles or their existence less frequently than the project staff. Both groups mentioned a general dimension of social justice and referred to the good performance of the programme in this area. They also noted that limited attention was paid to the inclusion of different age and gender categories (inclusion of categories), but both groups emphasised the absence of other important categories. The age limit was met with disapproval by the beneficiaries as, for example, some projects had set an age limit of 50 years, thus excluding older women, who were considered social experts, and deprived the community of their experience and knowledge.

With regard to the principles of resilience, there was a discrepancy between the beneficiaries. Some felt that the projects contributed to strengthening the resilience and capacities of local communities, while others felt that this dimension was completely absent. There was a similar discrepancy with regard to the principle of knowledge diversity. Some beneficiaries felt that the project performed well in this regard, while others felt that knowledge diversity was not sufficiently addressed. This discrepancy was also observed among project staff, who had different opinions about performance in these areas.

In terms of power dynamics, there was a clear difference between staff and beneficiary ratings. Staff indicated that the programme took some dynamics into account, while partially ignoring them in some cases, while beneficiaries felt that the projects themselves focused on local power

dynamics, but that these dynamics were not adequately addressed at the programme level as a whole.

There was a mixed assessment from the beneficiaries' perspective, with some expressing negative views about the programme's role in empowering women. They felt that the programme's offerings were limited to "*NGO-ised Empowerment*", a repetitive rhetoric that promotes empowerment without bringing significant changes to women's lives. For them, incentives such as transport or food allowances merely increased satisfaction, while the real challenges of structural discrimination or social restrictions were not addressed in depth. Furthermore, some noted that the concept of gender equality itself is rejected by society as an imposed Western discourse, which hinders the effectiveness of any project operating under this banner. Stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes were also evident in some contributions that blamed refugees or women from other backgrounds for economic challenges. This reflects the continued dominance of the "*External Saviour*" discourse, which reproduces rather than dismantles discrimination, as evidenced by stereotypes expressed by some project staff and beneficiaries. These attitudes highlight that, despite programme efforts, interventions have been only partially effective in challenging hierarchical or superiority-based approaches to working with local communities. However, there were also positive comments about the programme's role in empowering women in ways that reflect their social and economic context.

In contrast, project staff had a more diverse and complex understanding of the programme's role in empowerment. Some viewed empowerments as liberation from social constraints and structural discrimination, while others focused on practical aspects, such as adapting training to women's roles, using affirmative action to facilitate participation, or supporting economic independence through small grants. Some also adopted a

broader intersectional approach, seeing empowerment as an interconnected process influenced by age, class, cultural identity, and social circumstances. However, the practical application of this understanding was sometimes limited by the pressure of quantitative indicators imposed by funders, so the impact of the programme fluctuated between progressive theoretical rhetoric and an implementation reality that did not always match these claims. Finally, despite criticism from both beneficiaries and project staff, both groups agreed that the programme was superior to other similar EU programmes, whether in terms of its design, the support provided to women, or the facilities made available to them. However, as the beneficiaries who expressed their opinions and the project staff were the most co-operative participants or project leader candidates, the reality on the ground could be more complex, more difficult, and perhaps less effective than what was publicly discussed in the evaluations and interviews.

In conclusion, Chapter Seven presents the results of interviews with seven final beneficiaries of the project. The aim was to gather their views and compare them with those of the project staff to enhance the credibility of the data. The interviews revealed that the programme was relatively successful in understanding the local socio-economic context and implementing measures tailored to the needs of local communities while respecting customs and traditions. The economic aspects of the programme were also praised, particularly for empowering women through training opportunities and financial support, with an emphasis on the importance of sustaining these measures to ensure long-term impact. However, it was noted that little attention was given to the political context, and important regional issues were not specifically addressed, which caused resentment among some beneficiaries and limited the programme's effectiveness in the political arena.

Regarding the principles of intersectionality, it was noted that the practical application of the concept of intersectionality was limited, although some beneficiaries were familiar with its meaning. They observed that the programme focused superficially on inclusion and diversity without addressing the real structural barriers faced by marginalised groups, such as older women or people from different socio-economic backgrounds. They also identified a gap between the understanding and practical practises of project staff, and the real challenges beneficiaries face in their daily lives, particularly concerning local power and influence.

With respect to women's empowerment, some beneficiaries criticised the organisational nature of the programme, arguing that women's empowerment often remained merely a buzzword. Project staff, however, understood women's empowerment as liberation from social constraints, economic support, training, and practical support, taking intersectionality into account. Despite this discrepancy, both parties agreed that the programme is superior to similar EU programmes, but it does not fully reflect the complex reality on the ground, and its effectiveness may be less than participants' evaluations and the interviews suggest.

Chapter Eight: Policy Recommendations and Final Remarks

This chapter aims to interpret what the findings reveal about how the ENI-CBC MED programme addresses intersectionality and whether it has been successful in effectively integrating it into the planning, implementation and evaluation phases. It also places the findings in the broader European policy context, highlighting strengths and weaknesses and showing how these findings reflect challenges previously raised in the literature.

In addition to the theoretical analysis, the chapter presents a series of policy recommendations that could help to strengthen the integration of intersectionality into EU development and cross-border cooperation programmes. These recommendations build on the practical and structural gaps uncovered by the research and focus on mechanisms that can make programmes more inclusive, equitable and responsive to the needs of diverse and marginalised groups. This chapter thus builds a bridge between academic research and practice and suggests concrete pathways for future policy development.

Results Discussion

This research shows that the consideration of intersectionality in the ENI-CBC MED programme was limited and unsystematic and largely based on individual judgment rather than a deeply rooted institutional decision. This finding provides a direct answer to the main research question: How far intersectionality considered in the design and implementation of the programme? It shows that intersectionality was not an institutional principle guiding the programme but was rather practised spontaneously and sometimes intuitively by some of its implementers. Thus, the main hypothesis of the research was partially confirmed: The programme is committed to a

progressive discourse of inclusivity, but in practice it tends to ignore intersectionality or devoid it of its critical and transformative content.

The first hypothesis assumed that the ENI-CBC MED programme tends to privilege donor knowledge over local knowledge, leading to marginalisation of local contexts and voices. The results partially confirmed this hypothesis. The programme showed progress in understanding the social and economic context of beneficiaries in local communities, as well as an interest in local contextual knowledge in both areas. Conversely, the process of project design and implementation was largely determined by the bureaucratic logic of donors and quantifiable criteria, at the expense of the inclusion of the cultural and political context of the target communities. For example, the political situation was not given due importance in project formulation or evaluation, even though it has a major impact on people's lives. This bias towards "donor language" led to the beneficiaries of some projects funded under the programme adapting to the funding criteria rather than expressing their actual needs.

The second hypothesis, which related to the inconsistent application of intersectionality, was fully supported by the findings. The research found that the official discourse of the programme included broad categories such as "women" and "youth" but treated these as homogenous categories without disentangling the intersections within these categories. For example, the circumstances of women with disabilities or refugees were considered only in a few projects. This disregard for intersectionality was not only arbitrary but also stemmed from the difficulty of transforming a critical concept such as intersectionality into simple, quantitative measures that can be monitored in performance indicators. Thus, the presence of intersectionality became an individual exception made by some staff out of personal motives or limited discretion, rather than a structural part of the programme philosophy.

Moreover, the principles of intersectionality were applied inconsistently and were insufficiently institutionalised. Whilst elements such as multi-level analysis and understanding power dynamics were present in some project interventions, there was no comprehensive strategy. Key principles such as reflexivity, time and space and a commitment to tackling structural inequality were conspicuously weak or absent. The focus remained on the micro level, while the ability to effect structural change at the macro level was limited.

As for the third hypothesis, that the concept of women's empowerment in the programme is defined through a neoliberal lens that emphasises economic participation rather than structural change, the findings largely supported this hypothesis. Most projects focussed on initiatives such as small business development or vocational training, which are important activities but do not challenge the structural patterns that reproduce gender and social inequalities. Moreover, many beneficiaries indicated that this type of "empowerment" serves the implementing institutions and NGOs more than the women themselves, as it improves their ability to fulfil donor indicators without actually changing the balance of power or alleviating the social and political constraints imposed on women.

The Selective Application of Context: From Technical Fixes to Political Blind Spots

The findings confirm a critical theoretical concern raised by researchers such as Haraway (1998) and Mohanty (1988): the dominance of Western institutional knowledge systems over development practises. While the ENI CBC Med Programme has demonstrated a commendable awareness of social and economic contexts, its engagement with political and cultural dimensions has been selective and often considered irrelevant to "technical"

projects. This is entirely consistent with the critique of "donor knowledge" (Jamal, 2015; Fasheh, 1990), which imposes a top-down, depoliticised framework on complex local realities. This selective engagement leads to a significant credibility gap, as noted by beneficiaries who have criticised the EU's "silence" on policy issues. This is in line with postcolonial critiques that portray this silence as a form of epistemic violence where Western frameworks are enforced and local political realities are ignored (Spivak, 1988; Maudsley, 2018).

This insight is closely aligned with the critique of the neoliberal development model, which often seeks apolitical, technical solutions to inherently political problems (Ferguson, 1994; Lee, 2007). The programme's approach in the historically colonised and unstable region of Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) reveals a fundamental tension: interventions are designed to promote resilience and cooperation, while systematically ignoring the political conflicts- such as the situation in Palestine or the EU's prioritisation of migration control- that create the conditions for such interventions. This selective engagement is not an oversight, but the direct result of an epistemological hierarchy that prioritises measurable technical solutions over the politically charged and complex "factual knowledge" of beneficiaries. As Verloo (2006) argues, EU policy often fails to distinguish between overlapping categories, leading to a "one-size-fits-all" approach.

Intersectionality: Between Intuitive Practice and Structural Absence

The research findings on intersectionality are particularly revealing. The term itself has not been widely understood or formally integrated, with practices often subsumed under the more palatable terms of "social inclusion" or "gender equality". This reflects scholars' observations that intersectionality is often "embedded" in development practice in ways that dilute its radical

potential to challenge power structures (Hankivsky, 2014). The data show that when intersectionality was applied, it often focused on a limited number of identity characteristics (primarily gender and youth), while disability, refugee status or rural isolation received less attention.

However, the analysis reveals a more nuanced picture. The principles of intersectionality- such as multi-level analysis, reflexivity and an understanding of fluid power dynamics- were actively practised by some staff, even in the absence of formal terminology or incentives.

This suggests a "*Latent Intersectionality*" within the programme, where pragmatism and ethical engagement at the field level led to practices that the overarching framework does not explicitly mandate. For example, practices led by committed female staff- such as providing childcare, designing the intervention in line with local cultures, etc. and the organic formation of peer support networks for women. While these practices are not framed in formal intersectional terminology, they represent grassroots, situated understanding of empowerment that links back to the original, collective vision of DAWN (DAWN, 2024). This suggests that the potential for transformative change lies not in the formal architecture of the programme, but in the areas of resistance and reflexivity exercised by individuals navigating the constraints of the donor system.

However, the lack of a comprehensive strategy, binding indicators and dedicated resources for intersectionality ultimately limits the impact of the programme. As beneficiaries emphasised, without the meaningful inclusion of marginalised groups in decision-making, efforts remain superficial. This supports Cornwall's (2016) argument that participation without redistribution of power leads to "invited spaces" that perpetuate existing hierarchies rather than challenge them. While the programme's focus on micro-level interventions is valuable, it risks overlooking the need for structural change at

the macro level - a classic criticism of project-based development (Mosse, 2005).

The relationship between donor and community: power, adaptation and the illusion of participation

The tension between donor priorities and local needs is a well-documented challenge in studies (Cook and Kothari, 2001; Moss, 2005). This research provides rich empirical evidence of how this dynamic plays out in the Euro-Mediterranean context. The findings confirm that the rigid constraints imposed by donors, rigid timeframes, bureaucratic reporting and inflexible budgets- often hinder a programme's ability to respond to the changing needs of the community. This creates an irrational incentive where project success is measured by meeting performance indicators and reporting deadlines, rather than tangible and sustainable impact.

An important original finding of this research is the phenomenon of *"Donor-Savvy Communities"*. The data suggest that communities with previous project experience, particularly women, have learnt to cope with donor demands and align their narratives and activities with donor expectations. While this demonstrates local resilience and adaptability, it also raises fundamental questions about the credibility of participation and the possible emergence of a new form of dependency on donor discourse. This realisation adds a new nuance to the traditional power dynamic between donors and beneficiaries and suggests that beneficiaries are not just passive actors, but active actors learning to assert themselves within the constraints of the system - an attitude that can mask their true needs and priorities (Lee, 2007).

The key to mitigating this problem, the findings show, is to promote genuine community ownership through participatory processes and stakeholder engagement. When communities feel that projects are driven by their real needs, sustainability increases. This supports the wider literature on participatory development but adds a crucial insight that is specific to the Mediterranean: that building trust through local influencers (e.g. mayors) and long-term co-operation with municipalities is a critical success factor in a region where trust in formal institutions can be low.

The NGO-isation of Empowerment: Between Neoliberal Co-optation and Transformative Potential

The different interpretations of women's empowerment between staff and beneficiaries are a prime example of the "NGO-isation" and depoliticisation of feminist concepts (Batliwala, 2007; Cornwall, 2016). While staff perspectives were theoretically nuanced, they were often constrained by a donor framework that emphasised quantitative indicators- the number of women trained or businesses established. However, beneficiaries sharply criticised this as "NGO-ised empowerment", a reduction of a potentially transformative concept to short-term grants and a rhetoric that does not challenge patriarchal structures.

This finding is directly related to the theoretical framework of the work on "white feminism" and the trickle-down approach (Zakaria, 2021). The programme's predominant focus on economic empowerment through SMEs and entrepreneurship reflects a neoliberal feminist agenda that aims to integrate women into the capitalist economy without questioning the underlying structures that produce inequality (Bennett, 2024; Federici, 2018). This approach is in line with what Zakaria (2021) refers to as "dictatorial feminism", where solutions are imposed from above. The beneficiaries' perception of

gender equality as a "Western imposition" emphasises the failure to root empowerment strategies in the local cultural and political fabric, a key shortcoming of white feminist approaches that ignore colonial legacies and local agency (Mohanty, 1988).

In summary, the ENI CBC MED programme is, as the data illustrates, a Janus-faced initiative. On the one hand, it is rightly perceived as more progressive, flexible and context-aware than other EU programmes. Its decentralised structure, emphasis on partnership and equitable funding are significant strengths that enable mutual learning and tangible, albeit localised, impacts.

On the other hand, the programme is ultimately limited by its inability to fully embrace the political and epistemological complexities of the Mediterranean region. The exclusion of the political context, the ad hoc and less institutionalised approach to intersectionality and the subordination to the rigid logic of the donors prevent the programme from bringing about the desired change. The divergence between the perspectives of staff and beneficiaries, especially in terms of empowerment and political sensitivity, shows a gap between intention and lived experience.

This research makes several key contributions to knowledge:

Theoretical Contribution: It demonstrates that the gap between intersectionality theory and practice is not merely an implementation failure but a structural outcome of epistemic and power imbalances inherent in the donor-recipient relationship. The research bridges critical development studies, feminist political economy, and post-colonial theory to show how "donor knowledge," "white feminist" frameworks, and bureaucratic imperatives actively co-opt and depoliticise intersectionality.

Empirical Contribution: It provides an analysis of intersectionality in practice within a major EU cross-border cooperation programme. By foregrounding the voices and comparative perspectives of both staff and beneficiaries across the Mediterranean, it moves beyond the policy-document analysis that dominates the literature. The identification of "latent intersectionality" and "donor-savvy communities" offers new conceptual tools for understanding agency and resistance within constrained systems.

Contextual Contribution: The research addresses a significant geographical gap by focusing on the Mediterranean region, a space marked by colonial histories, political instability, and profound North-South inequalities. It illustrates how universalising frameworks fail in contexts where identity and power are intensely contested.

Policy Recommendations

As the results show, the concept of intersectionality is still not used as an integrated methodological framework for programme design, implementation and evaluation in the current policies and practices of EU programmes, especially in the framework of ENI CBC MED. This lack not only marginalises broad categories of women and intersecting groups but also robs programmes of part of their true effectiveness and responsiveness to the diverse and complex realities on the ground. Accordingly, these recommendations aim to provide a practical and comprehensive approach that focuses on the increased integration of intersectionality throughout the project cycle, the development of more reliable and realistic monitoring and reporting mechanisms, and the adoption of flexible evaluation criteria that reflect the specificities of the local context. Implementing these recommendations will

help to improve the effectiveness of development programmes and ensure that they are more equitable, inclusive and sustainable.

1. Advance Intersectionality in Practice: Promoting the application of intersectionality in practice

To strengthen intersectionality in practice when designing a project, a fundamental shift is required from symbolic inclusion to treating intersectionality as an integrated methodological framework that guides project design, implementation mechanisms, and evaluation methods. To achieve this, several factors must be considered. First, it must be ensured that marginalised voices have genuine power in the decision-making process and are not merely symbolically represented. Second, there is an obvious need for a clear understanding of the concept of intersectionality and how it should be implemented in funded programmes and projects. Therefore, a dedicated training on intersectionality must be required for all staff and partners before the project begins, with particular emphasis on understanding the importance of "situated knowledge". Finally, institutional commitment should be embedded in funding and governance structures by including explicit requirements to address intersectionality in calls for proposals, submission guidelines, sub-grant mechanisms, and partner progress reports, thereby ensuring accountability and consistency in practice.

2. Reform of monitoring & reporting mechanisms and the evaluation system

Monitoring, reporting, and evaluation systems require fundamental reform to move away from a culture that prioritises idealised success narratives at the expense of reflecting challenges and on-the-ground realities. Reporting

should be reconceptualised as a tool for continuous learning and adaptive improvement rather than merely a mechanism for formal accountability. This entails developing reporting formats that capture complexity, failure, and contextual constraints, enabling programmes to respond more effectively to real conditions. Evaluation frameworks should also be expanded to include multidimensional criteria that account for social, cultural, political, economic, and interdisciplinary impacts, rather than relying predominantly on quantitative indicators. Crucially, evaluation findings must be actively used to inform the design of future projects, creating a meaningful feedback loop that supports institutional learning. Moreover, key performance indicators should be made more flexible and context-sensitive, allowing them to reflect local diversity and specificities rather than imposing generic standards. In addition, projects should be enabled to propose alternative or modified indicators based on field research and contextual analysis, ensuring closer alignment between programme objectives and lived realities.

3. Intersecting Categories

Regarding the ENI CBC MED programme, there was a focus on both gender and age factors to help the most marginalised. However, gender and age should not be viewed as separate categories but treated as intersecting with other factors, such as disability, race, social class, and nationality. This approach is important to ensure the inclusion of all groups that should not be excluded from support. To achieve this, the programme's priorities must expand to include more projects that specifically target older people, consider their circumstances and contextual characteristics, and utilise an intersectional perspective to ensure a fairer and more equitable response to their needs. Additional targeted resources must also be provided for the most vulnerable

social groups or those with special needs, and an equitable distribution of resources should be promoted for them.

4. Promoting adaptive and reflexive practises, dealing with power dynamics and diverse knowledge

The programme must adopt an approach that combines continuous review and adaptability with consideration of power dynamics and recognition of diverse knowledge sources, which requires several measures. First, structured and regular spaces for reflection and review within projects must be established to discuss challenges, power dynamics, and inclusivity issues. In addition, promote mutual learning between projects and countries to share and reuse successful practices and experiences. Second, adaptive management that enables the adjustment of activities, methods, and budgets based on real-time feedback must be included. Third, before project implementation, accurate power dynamics mapping must be done to ensure equitable participation of different groups. Fourth, integrate different sources of knowledge (local, traditional, and academic) into project design and planning. Finally, invest in building trust with local communities to enable their authentic participation in solution development and decision-making.

5. Enhance Women's Empowerment

There should be significant measures to enhance the impact and application of women's empowerment on the ground, including the redefinition of the concept of empowerment itself so that it is comprehensive, contextualised, and understood as a structural process and not just a slogan or incentive. Imposing westernised definitions of gender equality should also be avoided, and instead, local actors in formulating culturally sensitive

empowerment strategies should be involved. Western ideas should be examined within the context in which they originated in the West, and to identify which elements of that context are absent in the local community in question (e.g., contribution-based social security systems). In addition, interventions should be designed in line with local social norms and gradually promote sustainable change and gender equality.

6. Strengthen Contextual Awareness

Effective programming relies on a nuanced understanding of context, requiring clear differentiation between social, cultural, economic, and political dimensions, and the design of interventions that address each simultaneously. Cultural factors should be more deeply integrated into programme design, and the tendency towards depoliticised approaches should be replaced by stronger engagement with locally relevant political realities. This requires systematic and continuous community assessments to ensure responsiveness to evolving needs, particularly those of marginalised groups such as older women and refugees. Local associations and community leaders should be actively involved in project design and implementation through genuine participatory methods that extend beyond consultation to shared decision-making. Transparent communication strategies should be developed to clearly convey programme objectives, limitations, and impacts, while coordination between local actors and donors at regional and national levels should be strengthened. Regular field visits by programme representatives and donors should be institutionalised to provide first-hand insights, enabling more realistic and flexible decision-making. Addressing gaps between programme discourse and community perceptions requires demonstrating genuine respect for local cultures, political contexts, and social norms, ensuring that empowerment is experienced as real rather than rhetorical.

7. Integrate Political Sensitivity

All EU-funded programmes are inherently political and must take into account local and regional realities and contexts when making funding decisions. This means that no funds should be allocated to countries that are involved in systematic human rights violations or genocide. Moreover, programmes should provide crisis response mechanisms, such as the flexible adaptation of activities in conflict areas

8. Review And Update the Project Proposal and Action Plan Before Signing the Contract.

It is recommended not to consider the concept presented during the project submission phase as final, but to have the final action plan reviewed after project acceptance and before signing the contract. (An updated status report before final contract signing is recommended. It is also important to implement the Agile¹⁰ project management approach to ensure rapid adaptability to new challenges and opportunities during project implementation and to improve the effectiveness of planning, execution and follow-up.

9. Improve Economic Sustainability

It is recommended that programmes and projects be designed to deliver long-term impact beyond the duration, with follow-up support. To achieve this, the fund should include recurrent costs and essential resources needed to sustain activities after the project ends. Monitor sustainability

¹⁰ Agile project management is an iterative approach that emphasises flexibility, collaboration, and continuous improvement by breaking projects into smaller, manageable cycles called sprints or iterations. This methodology allows teams to adapt quickly to changing requirements and feedback, foster better communication, and deliver value incrementally throughout the project lifecycle.

indicators must also be part of programme evaluation to ensure the sustainability of impact and effectiveness of projects in the long term. Most importantly, local economic initiatives that are aligned with community needs and available resources must be promoted, while fostering a sense of shared community ownership to ensure project sustainability.

10. Reduce Bureaucratic Barriers

There are a few recommendations that reduced Bureaucratic Barriers. First, simplify reporting requirements and administrative procedures so that smaller and less experienced organisations, especially those operating in marginalised areas, can effectively participate in the programme. Second, amend the financial regulations to allow for a more flexible reallocation of funds between activities, reflecting real-world changes and evolving community needs. Third, introduce flexible mechanisms to deal with crises and emergencies such as epidemics or conflicts, allowing for quick and effective adjustment of project schedules, funding, and expected outputs. Fourth, facilitate the financial review process and reduce project teams' workload to ensure focus on effective implementation and the achievement of project objectives. Finally, improve the programme's ability to adapt to new circumstances without compromising the quality of implementation or sustainability of impact.

Avenues for Future Research

This research opens several productive paths for future inquiry:

- **Longitudinal Studies:** Tracking the long-term impact of "donor-savvy" behaviour on community solidarity and autonomous political mobilization.
- **Comparative Analysis:** Comparing the ENI CBC MED programme with other EU instruments (e.g., Horizon Europe) or with programmes funded by other donors (e.g., bilateral agencies) to identify institutional factors that enable or hinder intersectional implementation.
- **Focus on Success Factors:** A deeper investigation into projects or moments where intersectionality was successfully applied, to identify the specific conditions, leadership styles, and strategies that made it possible despite systemic constraints.
- **Beneficiary-Led Research:** Employing participatory action research methodologies where beneficiaries themselves design and conduct studies on the impacts of development programmes, ensuring that knowledge production is democratised.

Concluding Remarks

This thesis set out to investigate how intersectionality is understood and implemented in the ENI CBC MED programme, and to what extent these concepts are embedded in development interventions across diverse contexts in the SWANA region and Europe. By conducting in-depth interviews with both project staff and beneficiaries, the research illuminated the complex dynamics that arise when donor-driven frameworks encounter local realities.

The analysis confirmed the main hypothesis of this research: the ENI CBC MED programme tended to ignore intersectionality rather than systematically integrate it. Intersectionality was absent from the programme's institutional architecture and left to the discretion of individual staff members. This resulted in fragmented and ad-hoc initiatives driven by personal commitment rather than a systemic approach. Nevertheless, intersectionality was not entirely absent. It appeared in localised, grassroots practices that reflected a form of latent intersectionality, an intuitive, situated application of the concept that, while lacking institutional recognition, nevertheless created small but meaningful spaces of inclusion.

Women's empowerment was also predominantly framed through a neoliberal and NGO-centred lens, where measurable outcomes such as economic participation were prioritised over structural change. This reduced empowerment to technocratic exercises, while the deeper cultural, political, and social dimensions of women's lives remained under-addressed. Beneficiaries, in particular, were critical of this approach, stressing that empowerment cannot be achieved through symbolic measures or concepts imposed from the outside.

Despite these limitations, the programme showed some strengths. It demonstrated sensitivity to local economic and social contexts and provided

platforms for cooperation across diverse regions. However, cultural dimensions and political sensitivities were frequently overlooked. This absence undermined the relevance of interventions. Moreover, trust emerged as one of the most critical principles for sustainable impact. Community ownership was identified as the key determinant of whether projects endure beyond donor cycles. When communities felt a sense of ownership, engagement was stronger, and initiatives continued after external funding ended. Without this sense of belonging, projects risked remaining superficial, diluted long-term impact.

The research also revealed the phenomenon of “donor-savvy communities”, where beneficiaries, particularly women, learned to adapt their narratives to donor discourses to secure resources. This finding complicates simplistic binaries of donors as powerful and communities as passive. Instead, it highlights how communities act strategically within constraints. Yet, while such strategies showcase resilience and adaptability, they also risk obscuring genuine needs and priorities, potentially reinforcing dependency on donor logics.

Methodologically, this research made an important contribution by foregrounding the voices of project staff and beneficiaries rather than privileging official programme documents. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, it exposed the tensions between policy rhetoric and lived experience, revealing how concepts such as intersectionality, empowerment, and power were understood and applied in practice. This approach reflects the theoretical foundations of the research in intersectionality and situated knowledge, reaffirming the importance of qualitative, participatory research in uncovering complex realities.

Theoretically, the research contributes to debates on epistemic colonisation, showing how donor frameworks often reproduce rather than

dismantle hierarchies of knowledge and power. It highlights the need to reframe women's empowerment as multidimensional, encompassing political, cultural, social, and economic dimensions, and to recognise how overlapping forms of marginalisation shape women's experiences. Practically, it recommends that EU programmes move beyond the "External Saviour" model by embedding intersectionality as a structural principle, ensuring recurrent costs and sustainability are planned for, and placing community ownership at the heart of interventions.

Reflecting on these findings, I return to the metaphor of my mother's "magic recipe" previously mentioned in the introduction. After analysing and recognising how her intersectional interventions were both authentic and effective, the question remains: what if such a recipe was scaled up? What if initiatives rooted in community knowledge and lived realities could move beyond personal efforts and modest resources, such as the little money my mother 'Robin-Hooded' from my father's pocket, into large-scale interventions supported by millions of euros? The potential is immense, yet too often overlooked. If donor frameworks embraced this kind of authentic, intersectional practice, funded programmes could move from symbolic gestures to transformative change. This is not a romantic ideal but a practical horizon that should not be missed.

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