

# Guidance Note: Foundations of disability-inclusive WASH

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## Introduction

This guidance note is designed to support mainstream development organisations in planning for disability inclusion within community-based Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) projects. Rather than providing practical tips on inclusion during implementation (which are available in other resources), this guidance focuses on the foundations of an inclusive approach to WASH in order to assist organisations to plan and budget for an inclusive approach in the design/inception phases of WASH programs.

### **Rights-based approaches to WASH: working with communities**

**Inclusive development** refers to community development activities, such as WASH activities, that include and benefit the whole community. This means targeting and deliberately including people and groups who are most likely to be excluded, such as people with disabilities.

Inclusive Development is both a process and an outcome. It is the process of making sure everyone is able to participate in development activities and is included in decision-making. It is also an outcome which is achieved when all community members benefit on an equal basis from a project, activity or service.

A rights-based approach to disability-inclusive WASH is based on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). This means that WASH programs should ensure people with disabilities are able to participate in community-level planning and decision-making and to engage with WASH service-providers and other duty bearers, and to fulfil their rights to WASH access.

Effective disability-inclusive WASH programs also challenge discriminatory attitudes, norms and practices that may exist in the community towards people with disabilities, and in particular women and girls with disabilities. Overcoming barriers such as these is often essential to enabling people with disabilities to fully realise their rights to WASH services and activities.

## **Investment in staff's commitment to and understanding of disability inclusion**

Disability inclusion is implemented most successfully when program staff understand and are committed to a rights-based approach to disability inclusion, see this as an organisational priority, and are supported to make changes and promote inclusion. This may require some up-front capacity development opportunities for staff, as well as strategies that mobilise commitment for disability inclusion at all levels of the organisation, including senior management.

This is most effective when projects: engage directly with local people with disabilities, for example through partnering with Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs); get to know them and the local disability context; and understand the barriers they face. This may require a commitment to undertaking a range of activities with all project staff at the start of the project, potentially in combination with similar activities related to broader gender equity and social inclusion. This approach usually leads to a higher level of success in implementing inclusive projects, even if they are more challenging or resource-intensive initially.

Ensuring that capacity development on disability inclusion is seen as a long-term strategy, which is built on and reinforced throughout a program (rather than addressed through a one-off training session), can also help to improve its effectiveness.

## **Integrating disability inclusion throughout the WASH program cycle**

Disability-inclusive WASH projects are most effective when disability is integrated throughout each stage of the project cycle. This means that program designs, project activities, and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks and processes need to incorporate strategies to meaningfully include people with disabilities.

These strategies should be identified with input from a DPO and from people with disabilities from the local context. However, it is important to note that many DPOs may not be familiar with development programs or WASH approaches and activities, so often development organisations need to actively consider how to apply suggestions from people with disabilities to their program processes.

## **Including people with disabilities within community processes**

Rather than undertaking separate activities just for people with disabilities in communities, it can be more effective to include people with disabilities within the general project activities planned within a community. This helps to promote broader community inclusion and acceptance of people with disabilities, and to reduce concerns from other community members about preferential treatment.

In some cases targeted activities, which specifically enable people with disabilities to participate in and benefit from WASH on an equal basis to others, may be required. These may include assisting with access to assistive devices, supporting establishment or capacity-building of DPOs, household-level adaptations of infrastructure etc. These approaches should be carefully thought out and monitored to ensure they are promoting broader inclusion and not leading to unintended negative consequences.

## **Working across community, service delivery, systems and policy levels**

While many disability-inclusive WASH initiatives operate at the community level, it is important to also integrate disability inclusion into service delivery, systems strengthening and policy engagement work. For example, this may include ensuring accessibility standards are integrated into operations and maintenance processes or national building codes, or advocating for disability inclusion standards or guidance in national WASH policies.

## **Deepening disability-inclusive WASH practice**

### **An integrated approach to gender equity and disability inclusion**

Promoting gender equity and promoting disability inclusion within WASH involve many of the same processes, and deal with similar underlying power issues. Furthermore, there is evidence that:

- women and girls with disabilities in developing countries experience complex barriers to WASH relating to both their gender and their disability, including expectations around WASH-related labour.
- women and girls who care for family members with disabilities experience additional WASH challenges, such as increased labour in fetching water or performing hygiene tasks.

This means that programs may need to give special focus on supporting the active participation of women with disabilities, in decision-making and leadership roles.

Given the potential overlap in concepts and approaches, some programs may find it useful to consider disability and gender together, under the framework of Gender Equity and Social Inclusion (GESI). This will help to avoid overwhelming program staff and ensure that any disability or gender-specific activities or advice are coordinated and complementary. When taking an integrated approach to GESI, it is important to still separately monitor outcomes for people with disabilities to ensure these are not overshadowed by other activities.

### **Accessibility and use of universal design**

Good practice disability-inclusive WASH programs should consider and resource accessibility of information, communications and infrastructure, including utilising universal design within infrastructure investments. This will enhance usability of infrastructure to the whole community, in particular people experiencing illness or injury, frail older people, heavily pregnant women, children and people with disabilities. In relation to WASH infrastructure, this means:

- applying universal design principles to community-level infrastructure to promote the broadest use possible within the community;
- ensuring design of household infrastructure (such as latrines) takes into account the particular individuals who will use them and involves these people in the design process;
- helping the community to design and build locally appropriate accessible infrastructure at the community and household levels;

- involving people with disabilities in the process of designing and auditing facilities;
- monitoring and documenting successful, accessible local designs and ensuring these can be reproduced locally, and learning from unsuccessful designs so mistakes are not repeated in future;
- sharing designs and lessons within the WASH sector and government for maximum impact; and
- advocating for WASH accessibility standards.

As well as accessible infrastructure, comprehensive accessibility in WASH requires making events and meetings (e.g. hygiene awareness-raising sessions or WASH committee meetings) accessible, and ensuring Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials and communication processes are accessible to those with a disability, including people with a variety of impairments.

### **Working with local people with disabilities and their representative organisations**

As discussed above, including local people with disabilities in development processes is fundamental to disability-inclusive WASH. An effective way to ensuring the participation of people with disabilities in program decisions and planning is by working with Disabled People's Organisations or other representative networks. The role played by a DPO or other representative organisation in a program should be negotiated and reflect mutual interests of both the program and the partner organisation. Working with local DPOs often requires a flexible approach focused on capacity strengthening, which should be resourced within the WASH program.

### **Linking with other disability programs and services**

Given community WASH programs generally work at a household level, this provides the opportunity to find people with more significant/complex disabilities within communities – including people who may find it difficult to leave the house, who may not be identified through other community services and programs. Given this, good practice disability-inclusive WASH programs put in place systems to refer people with disabilities to disability-specific services and programs where they exist.

This requires networking with local service providers, such as those providing community-based rehabilitation services or aids and devices, and establishing referral systems and processes. Referrals should always be made with the consent of the person with disability. There may also be opportunities for service providers to use project activities as entry points to directly reach people with disabilities, for example through involvement in baseline activities or accompanying staff on project visits.

### **Supporting people experiencing more complex barriers to WASH**

WASH programs play a particularly important role in actively supporting people with more severe disabilities, frail older people, people with chronic illnesses and/or those experiencing incontinence issues and their families to enhance their quality of life, by addressing more complex sanitation and hygiene issues. This may require a small amount of additional resourcing, and can have a significant impact on the dignity and quality of life of the person and their family, as well as the sanitation and hygiene

status of that family and surrounding community. Full inclusion of people with disabilities is required to achieve mainstream WASH goals such as achievement of Open Defecation Free status within communities. Solutions identified will need to be mainstreamed into regular program processes to enable the program to reliably identify people requiring additional support and mechanisms: e.g. provision of additional materials such as hygiene 'kits', bedpans or toilet buckets; additional visits by field staff; working together with/referring to community-based health workers etc.

### **Monitoring, Evaluation, Knowledge and Learning**

Strategies to monitor the effectiveness of inclusion efforts should be imbedded in WASH program monitoring and evaluation systems. Ideally this will include a combination of quantitative indicators that track the number of people with disabilities involved and benefiting from the program, and qualitative indicators that monitor the extent of participation and impact of the program on the lives of people with a variety of impairments.

Programs should also seek to document and share learning from disability inclusion efforts, to help contribute to the evidence base and strengthen disability-inclusive practice within other programs and organisations.

### **Further information and resources**

Jones and Wilbur (2014) Compendium of Accessible WASH Technologies

<https://washmatters.wateraid.org/publications/compendium-of-accessible-wash-technologies>

DFAT (2013) Accessibility Design Guide: Universal Design Principles for Australia's Aid Program

<http://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Pages/accessibility-design-guide-universal-design-principles-for-australia-s-aid-program.aspx>

Inclusive WASH Website

<http://www.inclusivewash.org.au/>



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