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Reducing barriers that prevent persons with disabilities in Uganda from accessing and utilizing WASH facilities

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This paper provides recommendations to address the challenges faced by persons with disabilities (PWD) in accessing and utilising water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities in Uganda. The paper has been written by the Executive Director and a colleague from the Ugandan community-based organisation Rights for Disability Development Foundation (RDDDF), who are themselves PWD. It includes the status of WASH facilities in Uganda, barriers which prevent PWD accessing and utilizing suitable WASH facilities and recommendations to improve the situation. The paper is intended to inspire the diverse leaders in Uganda to upgrade WASH facilities within the country, to meet the various needs and abilities of PWD and to thereby reduce the barriers they face.

The status of WASH facilities and their access to persons with disabilities

In 2015 most societies in the world embraced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) where inclusion of persons with disabilities (PWDs) and other vulnerable groups became an essential part of the development process. So, it is imperative to ensure access to water and sanitation for all, including people with disabilities, by 2030.

Another enforcing instrument is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), adopted in 2006. This resulted in awareness raising as well as reduced discrimination towards PWDs. The resulting changes are well illustrated in the UNICEF guidance note, *WASH Disability Inclusion Practices*, which specifies the need to “address discrimination and stigma when providing WASH services, encourage the participation of people with disability in all decision-making processes and ensure WASH-related information is in formats that people with different types of disabilities can understand” (UNICEF 2016, p. 2). The same study further instructs to “raise awareness and talk about people with disabilities’ rights to WASH as well as their specific needs when planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating WASH activities with government, sector partners and communities to promote positive attitude towards addressing the WASH needs of people with disability”. This guiding document further specifies to “consider disability in the design, monitoring and evaluation of development and emergency WASH interventions. Disaggregate data by disability, identify specific bottlenecks faced and solutions to the bottlenecks and include disability-related indicators” (ibid). UNICEF has clearly stated that including PWDs in accessing WASH facilities is a fundamental right that should not be overlooked by diverse planners. The guidance note states it “is intended for UNICEF professionals working on WASH policy, programmes and projects at national and subnational levels’ (ibid, p. 3). This guidance note is also “useful for government and sector partners working to advance disability inclusion and accessibility in the provision of WASH services” (ibid). UNICEF is showing the way for itself and other stakeholders in society to include PWDs in enabling them to access WASH facilities alongside other services that keep life going and kicking. UNICEF feels it is important for children/persons with disabilities to access WASH facilities equitably because “there are at least 93 million children with disabilities worldwide. A majority of these children live in developing countries and they are one of the most marginalized and excluded groups in society” (ibid, p. 4). However, children/persons with disability deserve services just like other human beings. As pointed out by UNICEF, “Children with disabilities have the same rights as any other child, including the right to clean water,

hygiene and sanitation, but they may also have specific needs and it is the responsibility of the WASH sector to meet the needs of all children, including children with disabilities’ (ibid). Additionally, “with over 884 million people lacking access to safe drinking water, and over 1 billion people without sanitation, making WASH more accessible for all by applying universal design principles benefits everyone in the community, including people with disability” (ibid). Access to safe water and sanitation are fundamental human rights, ratified by the United Nations in 2010. This requires the principles of non-discrimination and equality in access to water and sanitation programs and policies at all levels. Poverty and social exclusion are closely linked and can lead to experiences of discrimination and stigma. People may be excluded from WASH efforts due to individual inequalities such as gender, ethnicity and disability; group-related inequalities such as caste or religion or geographic inequalities such as living in informal settlements or in remote/rural places.

“Provision of safe, inclusive and accessible WASH facilities ensures everybody benefits from improved health outcomes, enhances the protection of people with disability, reduces the workload of families in caregiving tasks and reduces the rate of acquiring and spreading of disease” (ibid, p. 4).



Figure 1. A causally constructed latrine, lacks universal designed components not disability friendly

Reducing barriers which prevent people with disabilities from accessing and using suitable WASH facilities in Uganda

Diverse barriers prevent PWDs in Uganda from accessing and utilizing WASH facilities. Key among them is the limited attention to this issue by leaders in the region. “Taking the right to health as an example (although the following is relevant for all social services), we can make an assessment of access to services based on the following criteria: availability, accessibility, affordability, acceptability and accountability” (Handicap: 2009, p. 8. It is unlikely that local and national leaders in Uganda consider the above factors to make WASH facilities in their areas accessible to PWDs.

Based on the personal experience of the authors and others linked to the Rights for Disability Development Foundation (RDFF), it is rare to find public toilets, public water points and similar WASH facilities in urban centres in Uganda which are accessible to PWDs. Only a handful of WASH facilities operated by some sensitive civil society organizations host accessible structures to PWDs. Consequently, WASH facilities in the public and private sectors are generally hardly accessible or simply inaccessible to PWDs in Uganda. This situation is largely attributed to the inadequate attention by government.

The following barriers persist in blocking PWDs in enjoying WASH facilities in Uganda:

- **Budgeting** – as most health budgets in the country are below 15%, the financial resources ear-marked for WASH facilities are insufficient to cater for this component. As a result, accessibility structures for PWDs become insufficient or absent.
- **Planning and programming** – little mention is made of disability-friendly WASH facilities during the planning processes, so when implementing programmes, accessibility structures for PWDs hardly register any presence. It would be useful for leaders to include accessibility structures in the planning and programming processes.
- **Laws and policies** – it is at this level that inclusion of any accessibility structures and other disability-friendly components starts. Policies float proposals which are in turn protected and promoted by the law. It is at this level that civil society and other advocates need to lobby leaders to include the needs of PWDs in Uganda, to access and utilize appropriate WASH facilities. It is the hope and prayer of the authors of this paper that the concerned advocates will lobby the relevant leaders to address the accessibility issue at policy and legislation levels, as starting points.

Suggested remedies for proposed barriers

Table 1 proposes suggested remedies for the key barriers in an intervention framework.

Table 1. Intervention framework to improve access and utilisation of WASH facilities by PWD	
WASH challenge	Suggested remedy
Budgeting gaps	Advocates to lobby leaders to budget for accessibility structures in WASH facilities to cater for persons with disabilities
Planning and programming gaps	Advocates to lobby leaders to include accessible WASH structures in key plans and programmes
Laws and policies gaps	Advocates lobbying leaders to include the needs of persons with disabilities in key laws and policies.

A synopsis of lessons learnt

Briefly, the lack of/limited availability of inclusive WASH facilities leads to a host of lessons learnt, from the authors’ experiences in Uganda. Among others, these lessons include,

- First persons with disabilities in Uganda undergo a lot of stress in managing their daily lives,
- Involvement of persons with disabilities on all aspects of WASH activities the starting point of inclusive WASH success
- Widespread awareness creation is important in reducing attitudinal barriers for it plays a big role in reducing the free operation of persons with disabilities in the society on an equal basis like others.

- Pre-testing of prototypes of assistive devices provides for opportunity for interaction and improvement of the design e.g. movable toilet seats limit anal cleansing by the physically handicapped/crippled beneficiaries,
- Representation of persons with disabilities at leadership and technical levels helps in fighting stigma,
- All devices manufacture requires prior assessment, to avoid aggravating persons with disability,
- For inclusive WASH to be meaningful and sustainable for persons with disabilities, a multi-sectorial approach programming is required.

Way forward / general recommendations

The authors recommend the following as a way forward.

- Leaders in Uganda review the literature on the SDGs/Agenda 2030 and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) plus consult PWDs themselves, to understand, appreciate and support the issue of providing accessible WASH facilities to PWDs in Uganda.
- Advocates to mobilize PWDs in Uganda to use music and drama demonstrations to sensitize leaders about the importance of accessible WASH structures in society.
- PWDs in Uganda to involve leaders in key meetings and events, so that such leaders easily understand, appreciate and better support disability issues.
- Key Civil Society Organisations promote accessible WASH facilities in partnership with Disabled Persons' Organizations (DPOs), such as RDDF, to promote widespread awareness on disability issues (including inclusive WASH) in Uganda.

Conclusion

Given the aforementioned issues, challenges, suggestions and recommendations on this subject, the authors truly hope that the time is ripe for leaders and members of society in Uganda to wake up to the need to regard persons with disabilities as human beings who have the right to utilize accessible WASH facilities just like any other citizen of Uganda. With this understanding in mind, the authors call upon leaders in Uganda to plan to deliver proper WASH facilities for use by persons with disabilities countrywide.

References

www2.wpro.who.int Handicap 2009

UNICEF 2016 *WASH Disability Inclusion Practices: Including people with disabilities in UNICEF Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Programming.*

Contact details

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