

Towards Disability-Inclusive WASH: A Spotlight on People with Intellectual Disabilities

Access to clean water and adequate sanitation are essential to the realization of all human rights.ⁱ To achieve Sustainable Development Goal 6 (access to water and sanitation for all), water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) programs must be inclusive and accessible to all. It is evident that there is progress towards increased access to WASH; however, there are still accessibility gaps for vulnerable people, particularly those with disabilities.

People with disabilities tend to be relatively poor, and poverty is associated with less access to suitable WASH. By contributing to poor health, deficiencies in WASH access can increase health-related expenses and adversely affect economic activity in the household, exposing people with disabilities to more economic hardships, poverty, and increased dependence on other people and the state.ⁱⁱ

Women, who constitute the majority of people with disabilities, face additional challenges due to inadequate access to WASH. Young women and girls with disabilities face up to ten times more gender-based violence (GBV) than those without disabilities.ⁱⁱⁱ Fetching water from distant sources, accessing WASH facilities far from home, and finding private spaces to manage sanitary needs, including those related to menstruation, places them at increased risk. People with disabilities may also be exposed to abuse if left unattended by a caregiver who is engaging in WASH-related tasks.^{iv}

Disability-inclusive WASH must respond to the needs of people with the full range of disabilities. Nevertheless, many WASH initiatives that aim to be disability-inclusive focus on physical accessibility measures. **For over 200 million people with intellectual disabilities (ID) all over the world, inclusive and accessible WASH has to go beyond physical accessibility.** To ensure that people with ID, who are marginalized even among the population of people with disabilities, are duly included, WASH program implementers must ensure that:

1. WASH education is ID-accessible

- Ensure WASH campaigns are open to all and target the most excluded—for example, by meeting at familiar locations such as special schools and including pictures of people with ID in printed materials
- Design campaign messages that are short and in simple language
- Illustrate printed materials with pictures to help overcome reading difficulties
- Make campaigns/activities interactive and practical to help people with ID overcome difficulties processing abstract information
- Invite caregiver participation or design complementary education for caregivers to reinforce the learnings and support/promote behavior change of people with ID
- Include girls and women with ID and their caregivers in menstrual hygiene management (MHM) education, with adaptation and supplemental instruction as necessary

2. WASH facilities are easily identifiable, user-friendly, and private

- Site WASH facilities in safe, accessible locations, prioritizing those that are likely to be familiar to people with ID (e.g., special schools)

- Incorporate signage throughout the community to aid navigation to WASH facilities
- Include words and pictures on WASH facility signage
- Plan an easily identifiable and accessible location to store keys to public toilets that must be locked when not in use
- Design WASH facilities that consider and accommodate the presence of a caregiver

3. WASH services/facilities are affordable

- Use planning and evaluation phases to identify financial barriers people with ID face to using WASH resources^v
- Explore diverse structures and waivers for service user fees

4. WASH projects are inclusive

- Consult people with ID and their caregivers when planning a WASH project and incorporate their views and needs, observing accessibility considerations in the consultation process
- Develop ID-targeted WASH initiatives, particularly needs and barriers assessments
- Consider and address stigmatized needs, including those associated with incontinence and menstrual hygiene management^{vi}
- Ensure project indicators and metrics explicitly address disability (e.g., monitoring reports reflect the rate of WASH access by people with ID)

As an organization committed to the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities, Special Olympics has provided WASH education and developed resources targeting this community; for example:



Special Olympics and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) partnered to bring handwashing education to people with ID in Indonesia.



Materials minimal, simple text and vivid visuals are accessible for people with ID.



Special Olympics Bharat (India) and UNFPA will launch a pilot project providing targeted health WASH education, with a focus on MHM, to girls and mothers with ID, as well as to special needs educators.

Special Olympics reaches people with intellectual disabilities around the world in over 190 countries. To collaborate to make your WASH initiatives disability-inclusive, contact health@specialolympics.org.

ⁱ https://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/human_right_to_water.shtml

ⁱⁱ <https://www.who.int/teams/noncommunicable-diseases/disability-and-rehabilitation/world-report-on-disability>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Final_Global_Study_English_3_Oct.pdf

^{iv} https://www.unicef.org/wash/files/The_Impact_of_WASH_on_Key_Social_and_Health_Outcomes_Review_of_Evidence.pdf

^v <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/27542/117306-WP-P161461-PUBLIC-Disabilities.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y>

^{vi} <https://www.elrha.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/WASH-Rapid-Review.pdf>