



Disability-Inclusive WASH Humanitarian Response in Syrian Arab Republic

SUMMARY

The conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic has both increased the number of persons with disabilities and impacted persons with disabilities' access to schools, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) infrastructure and humanitarian assistance. In 2021, with 2.9 million persons with disabilities in need of WASH assistance in the country, the provision of disability-inclusive and accessible WASH services remains of critical importance. UNICEF and partners are meeting the WASH rights and needs of persons with disabilities by: (1) providing disability-inclusive humanitarian WASH services for internally displaced persons, including those with disabilities; and (2) restoration of WASH services through the rehabilitation of WASH facilities, with a focus on WASH in schools.

UNICEF has taken a holistic approach to the rehabilitation of schools, developing guidelines and standards to ensure the construction of all school infrastructure is disability accessible, including WASH facilities. The guidelines for the construction of schools and rehabilitation of damaged schools were developed and endorsed by the Syrian Ministry of Education in 2020 for use across the Syrian Arab Republic, working towards removing barriers for children with disabilities to access education at scale.

Context: Persons with disabilities in Syrian Arab Republic

Ten years after the onset of unrest in the Syrian Arab Republic, the Syrian refugee crisis remains one of the largest humanitarian crises in the world.¹ Since 2011, the conflict has internally displaced 6.7 million Syrians,² nearly half of the country's pre-conflict population.³ A further 5.7 million Syrians are refugees in neighbouring countries.⁴

The estimates of the number of persons with disabilities in the Syrian Arab Republic vary from 3.7 million (27 per cent)⁵ to 5 million (25 per cent),⁶ according to a national household survey and the Humanitarian Needs Overview respectively. These prevalence figures are nearly double the global estimate of 15 per cent,⁷ in line with several studies that have found higher numbers of persons with disabilities within the conflict-affected population.⁸

Figure 1. Saja, 13, plays football in Aleppo, Syrian Arab Republic. Saja lost her leg in an airstrike, along with losing her four best friends



According to a recent assessment by the Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP), disability prevalence in the Syrian Arab Republic varies by region. The highest prevalence (32 per cent) is in rural Damascus, most likely due to “its protracted exposure to high intensity conflict.”⁹

The geographical variation is even greater amongst populations of internally displaced people (IDP), with almost half of IDPs in the north-east (46 per cent) having a disability.¹⁰ The disability prevalence also varies between population group (see Figure 2 and Table 1).

Figure 2. Disability Prevalence by population group¹¹



Table 1. Impairment types for persons with disabilities in Syrian Arab Republic (percentage of individuals over 12 years old)¹²

	Mobility	Vision	Self-care	Communication	Hearing	Cognition
Returnees	15%	14%	8%	4%	5%	4%
Residents	17%	13%	8%	4%	7%	4%
IDPs	19%	15%	9%	5%	8%	6%

NOTE:

Since 2018, the Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP)ⁱ in the Syrian Arab Republic has used the Washington Group Questionsⁱⁱ to assess the prevalence of persons with disabilities in the country.¹³ This data collection tool takes a functional approach, asking survey participants if they have difficulties functioning across different domains. It has been widely tested in humanitarian contexts and has been shown to improve the accuracy of data on persons with disabilities.

The prevalence figures shown in Figure 2 do not include children under 12 years of age. While the disability prevalence amongst children in the Syrian Arab Republic is unknown, children continue to be killed and injured (in many cases resulting in long-term impairments) by explosive weapons and unexploded ordnance. In 2018, it was estimated that 3 million Syrian children had been exposed to explosive hazards.¹⁴ Compared with adults, children are disproportionately harmed by explosive hazards.¹⁵ In addition, due to chronic malnutrition, it is estimated that more than 600,000 children experience stunting and are at risk of mobility and cognitive disabilities.¹⁶

Persons with disabilities in the Syrian Arab Republic – almost a quarter of the population

– are disproportionately impacted by the crisis.¹⁷ They face barriers accessing life-saving humanitarian services, including Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) services and supplies. Persons with disabilities also face discrimination and marginalization, often in multiple and intersecting ways related not only to their disability, but also to age, gender, ethnicity, location and race.¹⁸

All people affected by the Syrian crisis, including persons with disabilities, have the right to access humanitarian assistance, including WASH services, based on their needs and without discrimination.¹⁹ The Syrian Arab Republic has also signed and ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Article 11

ⁱ The HNAP for the Syrian Arab Republic is a joint United Nations assessment initiative that tracks IDP and returnee movements, conducts sector assessments and monitors humanitarian needs.

ⁱⁱ For more information on the Washington Group Short Set, see: <https://www.washingtongroup-disability.com/question-sets/wg-short-set-on-functioning-wg-ss/>

of the CRPD requires that measures be taken for the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in humanitarian contexts, including in situations of armed conflict. However, evidence suggests that: “Persons with disabilities are, for the most part, being systematically denied their right to access humanitarian relief on an equal basis with others.”²⁰

The 2020 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP)^{iii,21} for the Syrian Arab Republic commits to strengthening the inclusion of persons with disabilities:^{iv}

BOX 1.

HRP COMMITMENT ON DISABILITY INCLUSION

“As a matter of principle and in line with the IASC [Inter-Agency Standing Committee] Guidelines, humanitarian actors are committed to fully incorporating age and disability considerations in assessment, strategic and operational planning as well as response and monitoring efforts.”

- OCHA, Humanitarian Response Plan, Syrian Arab Republic, Humanitarian Programme Cycle 2020, 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ An HRP articulates a shared vision by humanitarian actors of how to respond to a protracted or sudden-onset emergency. It is developed once the needs of the affected population are assessed and understood through an HNO or other joint needs assessment.

^{iv} For guidance on strengthening disability inclusion in HRPs, see: <https://sites.unicef.org/disabilities/files/Guidance>

WASH humanitarian needs

The UNICEF WASH response in the Syrian Arab Republic is informed by the Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO).^v The HNO identifies persons in need (PiN) of humanitarian assistance. Overall, in the Syrian Arab Republic, the number of PiN at the beginning of 2021 was 13.4 million, an increase of 21 per cent compared with the previous year (11.1 million in 2020).²²

The increase in PiN over the past year can also be seen at the sector level. The number of people in need of WASH assistance in 2021 is 12.2 million,²³ compared with 10.7 million in 2020. Of the 12.2 million, 24 per cent (2.9 million) are estimated to be persons with disabilities.²⁴ Overall, 59 per cent of the Syrian population is in need of WASH assistance.²⁵

The scale and diversity of WASH needs are shown in Figure 2, which illustrates the severity of WASH needs, while Table 2 highlights the number of people in need of different types of WASH assistance.

Over 7 million people in the Syrian Arab Republic are highly dependent on WASH humanitarian assistance, including 1.9 million living in IDP sites.^{26,vi} Further, in 2021, 36 per cent of households were using unsafe water sources and 70 per cent of sewage was discharged untreated.²⁷

[on strengthening disability inclusion in Humanitarian Response Plans 2019.pdf](#)

^v The HNO is a comprehensive analysis of a humanitarian situation and the associated needs. The development of an HNO is a shared responsibility among humanitarian actors and it informs humanitarian response planning.

^{vi} IDP sites refer to IDP camps, informal settlements and collective centres/shelters.

The HNO data do not have the granularity to show the specific WASH needs of persons with disabilities. However, the HNO specifies that persons with disabilities lack access to sanitation and, more generally, “face more constraints and various protection risks in accessing WASH services.”²⁸ In IDP sites, the substandard conditions of sanitation facilities, such as lack of sex segregation, locks and lights, have increased the risk of sexual harassment, sexual and physical violence and exploitation.²⁹

BOX 2.

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

“Sexual violence occurs in collective latrines sometimes, especially for young girls, women, widows, divorced women and people with intellectual disabilities, especially at night.”

- Focus group discussion, 2019, female aged 12–17 in north-east Syrian Arab Republic

Figure 3. Severity of WASH needs in Syrian Arab Republic, 2021³⁰

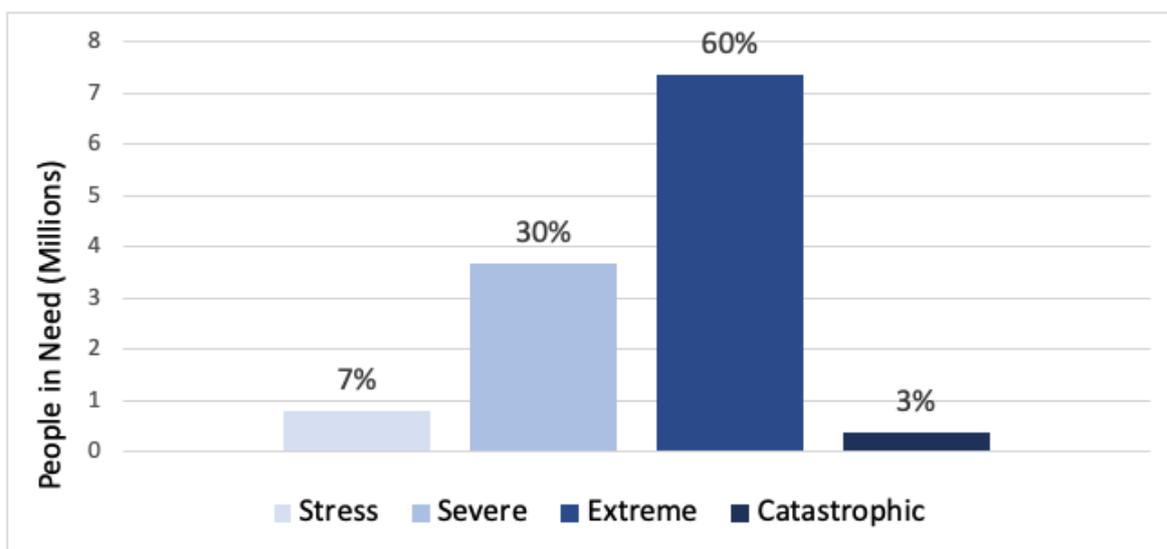


Table 2. Number of people in need by type of WASH assistance, 2021³¹

WASH assistance	Number of people in need
Water quality	3.3 million
Water quantity	1.4 million
Sanitation	3.2 million
Solid waste management	4.1 million
Financial burden of purchasing water	7.5 million
Hygiene supplies	6.4 million
Effective hand washing	5.1 million

The 2020 HNO recommends that the WASH sector should pay attention to gender-based violence (GBV) risk mitigation and safe access for all, including persons with disabilities.³²

In addition, with the deepening economic crisis, households that are financially vulnerable, such as households with persons with disabilities, face particular challenges in equitable access to WASH services.³³

Disability-inclusive WASH humanitarian response

Based on the HNO, the Syrian Arab Republic HRP, which provides the framework for

humanitarian response in the Syrian Arab Republic by humanitarian actors, is inclusive of persons with disabilities. The HRP acknowledges that vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities, require specific consideration when planning and prioritizing the response.³⁷

The HRP sets out objectives and activities for each sector, with the WASH sector being led by UNICEF. The first strategic objective of the 2020 HRP is, “Save lives – provide life-saving and life-sustaining humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable people with an emphasis on those in areas with high severity of needs.”³⁸

Table 3. Disability-inclusive WASH activities and indicators in Syrian Arab Republic 2020 HRP³⁴

WASH Objective 4: Improve WASH facilities and services in institutions to minimize sub-standard WASH conditions of the most vulnerable people in the Syrian Arab Republic			
Objective Indicator 4.1: # of people with improved access to gender and disability-friendly WASH facilities and services in schools , child-friendly spaces and health-care facilities		Target: 750,000 people	Result mid-year 2020: ³⁵ 1,052,709 people
Activity	Indicator	Target	Result mid-year 2020: ³⁶
Support to WASH facilities and services in schools and child-friendly spaces in close coordination with education and protection sectors	# of (pre)school children gaining access to gender- and disability-friendly WASH facilities and services	500,000 children	152,765 children
Support to WASH facilities and services in health-care facilities in close coordination with health sector	# of people gaining access to gender- and disability-friendly WASH facilities and services in health-care facilities	250,000 people	423,306 people
Education Objective 1: Scale up safe and equitable access to formal and non-formal education for crisis-affected children and youth (aged 3–17 years)			
Rehabilitate, improve or construct gender-sensitive and disability-sensitive WASH facilities	# of schools or learning spaces benefitting from gender-sensitive and disability-sensitive WASH facilities	3,580 schools	1,514 schools

The translation of the HNO assessment of the WASH needs of persons with disabilities is evident in the WASH sector priorities in the HRP. Table 3 shows the WASH sector objectives, activities and correlating indicators in the 2020 HRP.

The HRP annual report for 2020 is not yet available, so the results for PiN reached for the first half of 2020 are included in Table 3. The provision of WASH services and access to gender- and disability-friendly WASH facilities in health-care facilities was overachieved by 169 per cent by mid-2020 due to the COVID-19 response. However, school closures hampered the roll-out of gender-sensitive and disability accessible WASH facilities in schools in early 2020, with 42 per cent of schools reached.³⁹

In response to the HNO's assessment of the links between WASH and GBV for the most vulnerable, in the 2020 HRP, the protection sector commits to continue mainstreaming protection across all sectors, including the inclusion of persons with disabilities.⁴⁰ Further, the WASH sector also commits to taking measures to minimize protection risks for vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities, and to train WASH staff on GBV concepts and referral pathways.⁴¹ In 2021, training was conducted on gender mainstreaming in WASH and accountability to affected populations.

In alignment with the HRP, UNICEF's WASH response in the Syrian Arab Republic follows two approaches: (1) provision of humanitarian WASH services to IDPs; and (2) restoration of WASH services through the rehabilitation of WASH facilities and strengthening operation/maintenance. Both programmes have taken measures to meet the WASH rights and needs of persons with disabilities.

Provision of emergency disability-inclusive WASH in IDP sites

The provision of water and sanitation to all IDPs, including those with disabilities, is a life-saving service.

A nationwide household survey that surveyed IDP households across all 14 governorates in the Syrian Arab Republic found an even higher disability prevalence amongst those displaced, with a third (36 per cent) of IDPs surveyed having a disability.⁴² Compared with the national prevalence, disability prevalence was higher amongst IDPs, indicating links between displacement and a higher prevalence of disability.⁴³ In camps, women have a higher disability prevalence than men: 51 per cent of females have disabilities, compared with 29 per cent of males.⁴⁴

The survey found that 28 per cent of IDPs with disabilities reported water supply as their primary infrastructure need.⁴⁵ Over 80 per cent of IDPs with disabilities surveyed reported having access to safe water.⁴⁶

In 2018, UNICEF reached over 2.3 million people, especially in IDP sites, with the provision of WASH items, including family hygiene kits, soap and aqua tabs, hygiene awareness sessions and the installation of water tanks.⁴⁷ WASH service provision has also included the construction of accessible sanitation facilities for persons with disabilities in IDP sites, with 20 accessible toilets built in Al-Hol camp in 2020. This work continued in 2020, as the importance of soap and hygiene items became increasingly critical due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In January 2021, UNICEF provided 7,323 children, including 1,469 children with disabilities in Aleppo and Homs governorates, with soap and hygiene kits.

UNICEF's WASH emergency response also includes water trucking to ensure water supply to all IDP site residents. In the first half of 2021, UNICEF provided monthly water trucking to 341,905 residents (24 per cent are persons with disabilities) of IDP sites in north-east Syrian Arab Republic and rural Aleppo, as well as returnees in rural Damascus.⁴⁸ In addition, UNICEF provided WASH services to 49,000 people in Al-Hol camp, 24 per cent of whom are persons with disabilities.^{49,vii} UNICEF also cleans and maintains WASH facilities, including desludging septic tanks and solid waste collection in IDP sites.

The sector approach to the provision of emergency WASH to IDP sites is also shifting

towards sustainable WASH solutions, such as connecting IDP sites to existing water networks and/or the establishment of simplified water and sewer networks.⁵⁰

In other countries, such as Jordan, the establishment of WASH networks in camps has been very beneficial for households with persons with disabilities. In Jordan, as refugees with disabilities faced significant barriers accessing communal facilities, a water and waste water network that services each household has made it easier to tailor facilities to be accessible for individual households.

Figure 4. A water tank provided by UNICEF in Al-Hol camp, north-east Syrian Arab Republic



^{vii} Al-Hol camp in northern Syrian Arab Republic is home to more than 60,000 Syrian IDPs and Iraqi refugees.

Rehabilitation of WASH facilities and services

In addition to providing humanitarian WASH services in the Syrian Arab Republic, UNICEF is also rehabilitating, restoring and maintaining water and sanitation networks and services that have been destroyed and damaged by the conflict. To build the resilience of communities in accessing water, UNICEF provides emergency repairs to water networks, pumping stations, treatment plants and water tanks. In 2020, the restoration and maintenance of water supply strengthened the resilience of communities, reaching 3.16 million people, 759,884 of whom are persons with disabilities.⁵¹

In 2021, the lack of electricity in the Syrian Arab Republic^{viii} had an impact on water supply, limiting the functioning of water networks.⁵² UNICEF has begun integrating solar power systems into water supply rehabilitation projects⁵³ to stabilize water supply for all, including persons with disabilities.

In the first half of 2021, UNICEF also rehabilitated sewerage systems in 10 communities, improving sanitation for 984,739 people. In 2020, of the 906,528 people who benefited from UNICEF's sanitation programmes, 217,567 had disabilities.

Disability-inclusive WASH in schools

Due to the conflict, damage to school infrastructure, including WASH facilities, has been extensive. In the 10 years of conflict, 40 per cent of schools in the Syrian Arab

^{viii} In 2021, electricity has been limited to eight hours a day in urban areas and four hours in rural areas.

Republic have been damaged or destroyed.⁵⁴ As the conflict has escalated, schools have been deliberately targeted. In 2019, there were 157 attacks on education; in 2020, the 61 attacks on education killed at least 42 children and injured 38 children and adults.⁵⁵ The majority of the 2020 attacks (69 per cent) were by airstrike,⁵⁶ causing extensive infrastructure damage to schools.

Figure 5. Damaged toilets at Reyad Hamoud school



UNICEF and partners in the WASH sector are restoring and rehabilitating school infrastructure, including WASH facilities. The approach is to build back better, creating disability accessible schools and institutionalizing these approaches in government policy.

A multisectoral approach has been taken to education in the Syrian Arab Republic. Instead of creating separate standards or guidelines on WASH infrastructure in schools (as many countries have done), in the Syrian Arab Republic holistic guidelines were developed that provide infrastructure guidance and specifications for the design, construction and maintenance of child-friendly schools. The *Guideline for Designing and Maintaining the Child-Friendly Schools*

covers all aspects of school infrastructure, including WASH facilities. Released in 2020, the guidelines were developed by the Ministry of Education with the General Company for Engineering Studies and the University of Damascus, with support from UNICEF.

The *Guideline for Designing and Maintaining the Child-Friendly Schools* includes considerations for children with mobility disabilities in the design and technical specifications for classrooms, lecture halls, working spaces, corridors, stairs/ramps, doors, administrative offices, open spaces and car parking, as well as WASH facilities. The accessibility specifications for WASH in schools are comprehensive, covering:

- Toilets: grab rails, manoeuvring space, floor surface, fixture of toilet seat, horizontal mountings, flush and sanitary bins
- Hand washing: height, width and depth of basin, location, taps and mirrors
- Drinking water fountains: height, location and type of taps.

The guidelines specify the need for accessibility in both student and staff bathrooms.⁵⁷ The guidelines consider disability accessibility across all aspects of school infrastructure; however, they focus on persons with mobility disabilities and do not include infrastructure considerations for persons with other types of disabilities, such as vision impairments.

The guidelines form the basis for the construction of new schools in the Syrian Arab Republic and the rehabilitation of damaged schools. To support the implementation of these multisectoral guidelines, UNICEF funding is pooled between different sectors, a list of schools is determined and the construction of all school infrastructure is carried out under one

contract (rather than having a separate contract for WASH infrastructure). This allows for easier monitoring of disability accessibility.

In the first six months of 2021, UNICEF supported 130,476 students with the provision of hygiene supplies, water trucking to schools, hygiene awareness sessions and rehabilitation of WASH facilities to be gender-responsive, child-friendly and disability accessible. In 2020, UNICEF equipped 246 schools with disability accessible WASH facilities.

While UNICEF and sector partners are working to strengthen the accessibility of schools, including WASH facilities, only 44 per cent of children with disabilities are attending school, compared with 77 per cent of children without disabilities.⁵⁸ As well as reducing WASH barriers, UNICEF is working to improve access to education for children with disabilities. In the first half of 2021, UNICEF supported 6,699 children with disabilities (45 per cent of whom are girls) to access education in non-formal settings.⁵⁹ In 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic worsening exclusion from education for children with disabilities, UNICEF carried out a national door-to-door community mobilization 'back to school' campaign, reaching 400 caregivers and children with disabilities.⁶⁰

Figure 6. Hanaa, 8 years old, learning in a school in Aleppo. She was paralysed by an airstrike and now uses a wheelchair



BOX 3.

PROTECTING AND BUILDING THE RESILIENCE OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES AND THEIR FAMILIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In the Syrian Arab Republic, UNICEF's humanitarian social protection programme, in partnership with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, has reached over 15,000 children with disabilities and their families since it started in 2016.⁶¹ The programme provides humanitarian cash transfers with case management services to address social and economic vulnerabilities. Evidence shows that households with persons with disabilities in the Syrian Arab Republic are more economically vulnerable: 77 per cent of households with more than one member with disabilities have income insufficiency, compared to 68 per cent of households with no members with disabilities.⁶²

In January 2019, cash transfer monitoring revealed that 40 per cent of households used the cash assistance to meet the basic needs of their children with disabilities.⁶³

Persons with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. They are at greater risk of contracting COVID-19, more likely to face discrimination while accessing health care, and are disadvantaged by the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic.⁶⁴

To mitigate the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and enhance resilience of the most vulnerable families, between January and August 2020 UNICEF provided cash assistance and case management services to 8,100 children with disabilities.⁶⁵ In addition to the cash transfer, UNICEF provided hygiene kits to households with children with disabilities to give them the supplies they need to strengthen protection against COVID-19.

Delivering hygiene kits to households with children with disabilities across the country proved to be costly and logistically difficult. Due to these challenges, the provision of cleaning and hygiene supplies could not be sustained beyond the initial three-month period. The cash assistance programme is ongoing for households of children with disabilities, enabling households to buy hygiene items locally.

Lessons learnt

- The conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic has both increased the number of persons with disabilities and disproportionately impacted persons with disabilities' access to schools, WASH infrastructure and humanitarian assistance.
- UNICEF is strengthening the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the provision of emergency WASH services and working to

rehabilitate WASH infrastructure and networks.

- The rehabilitation and reconstruction of WASH infrastructure in schools, including the creation of guidance, presents an important opportunity to address barriers that children with disabilities face in accessing education.

- The holistic approach of creating guidelines and standards for child-friendly schools that include all aspects of infrastructure ensures that disability accessibility is considered across all aspects of the school environment, including WASH.
- The ongoing conflict and complex humanitarian context have created challenges for the provision of WASH to persons with disabilities:
- Despite the HRP specifying that efforts be made to consult people with disabilities, community engagement and participatory approaches are difficult in the Syrian Arab Republic.
- The guidelines for child-friendly schools are comprehensive in their scope and have included provision for disability accessibility in all aspects of infrastructure. While it is more feasible to closely follow the guidelines for new construction, the rehabilitation of damaged schools is constrained by the school's existing overall layout, which has imposed some limitations.
- The child-friendly schools' guidance is currently focused on physical impairments, with a gap existing in relation to accessibility for persons with hearing, visual and other impairment types.
- The monitoring system in the HRP measures: (1) the number of children accessing gender- and disability-friendly WASH facilities and services; and (2) the number of people accessing gender- and disability-friendly WASH facilities and services in health-care facilities. It does not specifically measure the number of children/people with disabilities accessing gender- and disability-friendly WASH facilities and services.
- There may be other barriers beyond infrastructure, such as negative attitudes, that may be impacting persons with disabilities' access to WASH facilities.

Figure 7. A teacher helps Grade 2 student Duuaa, who is blind, to assemble a wooden puzzle during a class in Al Walidia Basic School, near the Lebanon-Syrian Arab Republic border



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