



# Working Together to Ensure the WASH Rights and Needs of Persons with Disabilities in Ethiopia

## SUMMARY

UNICEF and partners in Ethiopia are working together to improve access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) information and services for persons with disabilities, one of the poorest and most marginalized groups of people in the country. Under the One WASH National Programme, the Government of Ethiopia, UNICEF and civil society partners are taking a coordinated approach to the provision of WASH services, with a focus on improving access for the most vulnerable households.

To institutionalize disability accessible WASH, national policies, guidelines and construction manuals on WASH in schools and menstrual health and hygiene (MHH) have been developed or updated to include comprehensive considerations for persons with disabilities. When disability is visible and integrated into national construction manuals and checklists, it creates accountability for the construction of accessible WASH facilities. In addition, UNICEF and partners have been building the capacity of the WASH sector on equity, inclusion and disability accessibility in WASH and Menstrual Health and Hygiene (MHH) through online training courses and 'Train the Trainer' approaches.

COVID-19 programmes have adapted approaches to ensure that COVID-19 prevention and hand hygiene information reaches persons with disabilities. Recognizing that many girls with disabilities are not in school in Ethiopia, UNICEF has conducted disability-inclusive community outreach activities on MHH alongside school-based programmes.

UNICEF and partners are meeting the WASH rights and needs of persons with disabilities in Ethiopia through coordination of WASH service provision to the most vulnerable; disability accessibility in national WASH standards; building capacity on inclusion and equity; and adapting approaches to meet the specific needs of persons with disabilities.

## Context

Estimates of the number of persons with disabilities in Ethiopia range from 7.8 million (9.3 per cent of the population)<sup>1</sup> to 15 million (17.6 per cent).<sup>2</sup><sup>i</sup> Persons with disabilities in Ethiopia are amongst the poorest and most marginalized groups. In urban areas, the extreme poverty rate for persons with disabilities is 41 per cent higher than for people without disabilities, with children with disabilities having the highest rate of extreme poverty.<sup>3</sup> Poverty impacts every aspect of a household, including their access to and affordability of water and sanitation services.

Ethiopia ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in July 2010.<sup>4</sup> However, the existing legal frameworks and policies take a medical approach to disability and there is scope for strengthening the human rights-based approach to disability.<sup>5</sup> In their 2016 Concluding Observations, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities noted that “persons with disabilities and their representative organizations are not systematically consulted in the development of all policies and laws, training and awareness-raising across all sectors.”<sup>6</sup> UNICEF and partners are strengthening the consultation and participation of persons with disabilities across the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector.

In addition, in their Concluding Observations, the Committee recommended that the Government of Ethiopia fully implement laws, regulations and directives on infrastructure accessibility and recommended that a comprehensive plan of action and standards on accessibility should be developed and adopted.<sup>7</sup> UNICEF is also working to strengthen both gender and disability

<sup>i</sup> Estimates on the number of persons with disabilities vary depending on the data collection methodology used.

inclusion in government WASH infrastructure policies and standards. In Ethiopia, UNICEF ensures that people, especially women, children, adolescent girls and vulnerable groups, can “equitably access safely managed water supply and sanitation services, end open defecation and adopt appropriate hygiene practices, including menstrual health and hygiene, in households, communities and institutions.”<sup>8</sup>

## Disability inclusion in the WASH sector in Ethiopia

Since 2013, the Government of Ethiopia has supported the establishment of the One WASH National Programme (OWNP). The OWNP brings together four government ministries,<sup>ii</sup> development partners and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) into a coordinated programme designed to improve the way WASH services are delivered in Ethiopia. The programme intentionally focuses on improving WASH access for the most vulnerable households, including persons with disabilities.<sup>9</sup>

In the WASH sector in Ethiopia, coordination mechanisms have been established to share information and create accountability on gender and disability inclusion amongst government and civil society WASH actors. At the national level, a task force has been established on gender equity and disability inclusion in WASH. The task force is led by the Ministry of Water, under the One WASH National Coordination Office, and meets regularly to provide updates within the sector on activities related to gender and disability transformation in WASH. The task force also reviews sector-wide plans to ensure disability and gender are considered.

<sup>ii</sup> Ministry of Water, Irrigation and Energy, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Finance and Economic Development.

To support the OWNP, UNICEF has collaborated with WaterAid, World Vision and Open University to develop a series of capacity-building modules, [available online](#). The training curriculum aims to build the capacity of people training to work in the WASH sector, as well as those already working in the WASH Sector in Ethiopia and can be used as pre-service and in-service. One of the modules, [Count me in! Inclusive WASH in Ethiopia](#), focuses on inclusion of persons with disabilities and gender equality.

The 10-hour online course trains participants to:

- Identify people who are excluded from WASH services
- Describe barriers to inclusive WASH
- Design and implement technologies and services for all
- Engage in the promotion of inclusive WASH services.

In 2019, a [learning note](#) was produced by UNICEF and IRC on how the OWNP has addressed inequality to ensure adequate WASH for all. The learning note documented the OWNP focus on universal access for all and how the programme had promoted accessible WASH in schools and accessible public toilets in towns.<sup>10</sup>

The innovative online curriculum and documentation of lessons learned related to equity and inclusion demonstrates the WASH sector's commitment to learning, building capacity and institutionalizing approaches to inclusive WASH in Ethiopia.

## Reaching persons with disabilities with hygiene and COVID-19 information and supplies

Globally, persons with disabilities have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>11</sup> They are at greater risk of contracting COVID-19, are more likely to develop severe health conditions and die from COVID-19, and are at greater risk of discrimination when accessing health services.<sup>12</sup> In addition, inaccessible information and communications result in persons with hearing, vision, intellectual or physical impairments not receiving COVID-19 prevention information and health services.<sup>13</sup>

**Figure 1. Preparing boxes of soap as part of the COVID-19 response in Ethiopia**



In Ethiopia, an assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable groups found that during the pandemic, persons with disabilities faced reduced access to primary health care, vaccination programmes, specialized health care and mental health care, as well as reduced access to education, worsening living conditions and increased violence, exploitation and abuse.<sup>14</sup>

The Ethiopia National Emergency Preparedness and Response Plan for COVID-19 (November 2020 to April 2021) recognizes that persons with disabilities are vulnerable and in a high-risk group. The Response Plan aims to identify these individuals and prioritize them for active surveillance by the Community Emergency Response Team.<sup>15</sup>

Following the confirmation of the first case of COVID-19 in Ethiopia on 13 March 2020, UNICEF Ethiopia supported the community through the distribution of 60,000 bars of soap to 30,000 vulnerable households in Addis Ababa, accompanied with risk communication messages on hand hygiene. Consequently, the support was extended to 165,000 vulnerable households in 10 cities across the country. The households were identified via the urban productive safety net programme, administered by the Federal Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, which includes persons with disabilities, the elderly, low-income households with members with chronic diseases and low-income female-headed households. Many of these vulnerable households are in some of the most underserved peri-urban/slum areas of cities.

The UNICEF Ethiopia WASH section seized the opportunity created by COVID-19 to scale up sanitation and hygiene conditions for the most vulnerable households, focusing on promoting the construction and use of improved toilets, complete with hand-washing facilities.

**Figure 2. A man, who is blind, benefited from the latrine improvement programme in Addis Ababa**



UNICEF Ethiopia partnered with LIXIL, who generously donated 165,000 latrine pans to the UNICEF COVID-19 response in Ethiopia. The households targeted for the latrines were identified through a rapid survey carried out by UNICEF in partnership with the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and the Federal Job Creation and Food Security Agency using the mWater mobile app. The rapid survey, carried out between October and November 2020, reached a total of 164,676 recipients of the Urban Productive Safety Net Programme (UPSNP), of which 11 per cent of the permanent direct support recipients are persons with different types of disabilities, in 10 cities in Ethiopia. Latrine installation is currently under way.

**Figure 3. Handover by UNICEF of Sato latrine pans donated by LIXIL to the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, Ethiopia**



The national COVID-19 response in Ethiopia, supported by UNICEF, has been disability inclusive, with efforts to include persons with disabilities in the coordination mechanisms and information dissemination approaches designed to reach persons with disabilities.

At the national level, the Public Health Emergency Management and Preparedness Technical Working Group has included focal points from organizations of persons with disabilities, along with representatives from UNICEF and other United Nations and civil society organizations. The technical working group has provided capacity-building training for disability focal points, who will act as outreach workers in their regions. The training included the use of sign language to communicate with people who are deaf. Seventy persons with disabilities from different organizations of persons with disabilities and disability focal points from different regions have been trained in sign language to communicate on COVID-19 prevention and response, including hand hygiene. The capacity-building is designed as a 'Train the Trainer' approach, so the knowledge will cascade down to the community level to reach persons with disabilities in their households.

As part of the Community Based Actions and Testing campaign launched in August 2020 to determine the level of COVID-19 infection in Ethiopia and raise awareness on prevention, UNICEF supported the production of five videos for children, youth and adults with disabilities.<sup>16</sup> In addition, UNICEF supported 1,850 brochures on COVID-19 and HIV to be printed in Braille for adolescents with visual impairments. The Braille brochures were distributed through the National Association of Persons with Disabilities.<sup>17</sup>

In 2020, UNICEF advocated for safe school re-opening and supported the government in the provision of WASH supplies and teacher training on COVID-19 prevention in 3,500 schools in nine regions.<sup>18</sup> To strengthen hand washing in schools in Ethiopia, UNICEF has led the development and production of 800 innovative school hand-washing facilities. The taps are foot operated using pedals, but in recognizing the challenge that children with mobility impairments would face using pedals, each facility also has a hand-operated tap with a large tap handle.<sup>19</sup> The innovative facility, designed and produced in Ethiopia by a UNICEF WASH engineer, was featured in a *Forbes* article on UNICEF's pandemic response.<sup>20</sup>

**Figure 4. UNICEF WASH Chief at Ethiopia, tests the metal pedals of the hands-free hand-washing stand designed by Steven Mugarra, UNICEF WASH engineer**



An assessment of the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 in Ethiopia found that living conditions had worsened for persons with disabilities.<sup>21</sup> Persons with disabilities are amongst the poorest in Ethiopia, with 95 per cent of persons with disabilities living in poverty.<sup>22</sup> They risk being further impoverished due to the economic downturn,<sup>23</sup> and face marginalization as care and support networks break down. According to a UNICEF report on the impact of COVID-19 on children with disabilities in Addis Ababa, “children with disabilities are also significantly more likely to be deprived of education and multidimensionally poor compared to their peers.”<sup>24</sup> UNICEF supported the Ethiopian Institute of the Ombudsman to reach 200 children with hearing, visual or developmental disabilities and their families in Addis Ababa with hygiene and food items.<sup>25</sup>

## Menstrual health and hygiene for girls with disabilities

A 2017 baseline survey found that there is a culture of shame and stigma surrounding menstruation in Ethiopia.<sup>26</sup> Many girls are not aware of the basics of menstruation before they experience it for the first time, with this awareness varying widely according to region. While the two regions border each other, awareness in the Afar Region (in the north-east) is 14 per cent, compared with Somali Region (in the east) where 74 per cent of girls are aware of basic information on menstruation.<sup>27</sup>

While the UNICEF baseline survey did not include data on girls with disabilities’ experience of menstruation in Ethiopia, in general girls with disabilities often face double stigma due to social norms around gender and menstruation and disability.<sup>28</sup> They may have lower awareness of

menstrual health and hygiene (MHH) if information is not produced in formats that they can understand.<sup>29</sup> A student with a visual impairment said that, on the onset of her period, she had thought that the bleeding was due to some kind of disease.<sup>30</sup>

School environment is a major barrier for girls to manage their menstruation hygienically and with dignity. Over half (56 per cent) of the girls in the baseline survey reported that they were never able to access water at school<sup>31</sup> and only 8 per cent of girls reported that soap for menstrual hygiene was always available.<sup>32</sup> The proportion of girls missing school due to menstruation varied between regions, with the highest in Gambella Region, where 46 per cent of girls missed school.<sup>33</sup>

### BOX 1.

#### VOICES FROM THE FIELD

*“I am constantly worried that my dress will stain during my period, I cannot see.”*

- Student with a vision impairment

Girls with disabilities are also less likely to be in school and benefitting from MHH information shared through schools. A study on the impact of disability on school attendance found that, in rural Ethiopia, 64.4 per cent of primary school-age children with disabilities were out of school and 98 per cent of secondary school-age children were out of school.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to encountering the same challenges as other girls in terms of access to water and soap, girls with disabilities who do attend school also face barriers when WASH facilities are not accessible.<sup>35</sup> The WHO–UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene

indicates that only a third (31 per cent) of schools have WASH facilities that are accessible.<sup>36</sup> Studies in a number of countries indicate that inaccessible WASH facilities are a barrier for girls with disabilities enrolling and attending school and become more critical at the onset of menstruation.<sup>37</sup>

UNICEF is working to include girls with disabilities in MHH programmes. At the national level, in 2016 UNICEF supported the Ministry of Health to develop a policy and implementation guideline on Menstrual Hygiene Management that includes considerations for girls with disabilities. The guide is for any organization working on MHH and outlines key principles to inform MHH programming, one of which is being inclusive of all girls and women, including those with disabilities.<sup>38</sup> It further specifies that gender-sensitive WASH facilities in schools should be clean, safe, private and accessible for children with disabilities.<sup>39</sup> The Ministry of Health advises that WASH programmes should establish construction standards for latrines and hand washing that consider both gender and disability.<sup>40</sup>

UNICEF and the Ministry of Health developed and delivered a national ‘Train the Trainer’ programme on MHH to build capacity at national and regional levels. The training includes representatives of organizations of persons with disabilities to ensure the information trickles down to the persons with disabilities. The training curriculum also includes a session on the needs of menstruators with disabilities.

Within UNICEF MHH programming, multiple approaches have been taken to reach girls with disabilities who are at school, as well as those that are out of school.

Hygiene clubs in schools, designed to share information on MHH, health and hand washing, as well as to empower adolescents,

have included girls with disabilities to participate in and lead activities in their schools.

#### **BOX 2.**

### **VOICES FROM THE FIELD**

*“Now I teach my family and friends around my house, I changed a lot! When I need, I get counselling, peer support and facilities, including pads.”*

- Student with a vision impairment

For example, in Tigray Region, Beti, a girl with a hearing impairment, is one of 20 students in an MHH club in her primary school.<sup>41</sup> In recognizing that children with disabilities face barriers in accessing MHH and health messages, Beti is now a health communicator and is overcoming these barriers herself and for other children who are deaf. The Health Club Coordinator and the School Principal are learning sign language, as are some of the students.<sup>42</sup> The MHH programme includes the construction of new facilities and rehabilitation of existing facilities, creation of a safe space to access MHH information, counselling and to rest, and the development of information materials.<sup>43</sup>

#### **BOX 3.**

### **VOICES FROM THE FIELD**

*“I like the club because there is awareness creation on hygiene, and I get sanitary pads. Outside schools having sanitary pads is difficult.”*

- Beti, a girl with a hearing impairment

UNICEF recognizes that many girls with disabilities are not in school to benefit from school-based MHH programmes. UNICEF and partners have developed a training package for health extension workers to identify children with disabilities and inform them and their families on managing their menstruation during home assessments and visits. The health extension workers also support and educate caregivers on talking to their child with a disability about menstruation.

**Figure 5. Beti, who is deaf, communicates using sign language with the MHH club coordinator at her school**



UNICEF is also working on community advocacy around MHH to raise awareness and reduce stigma related to menstruation. A task force has been formed for this advocacy with representation from different organizations of persons with disabilities.

## Disability-inclusive WASH in schools

A national situation analysis of WASH in schools, conducted in 2015 with the participation of students with disabilities, found that sanitation facilities were not inclusive. The researchers found that while persons with disabilities (both teachers and students) were present at most of the schools

they visited, none of the 16 schools had disability accessible facilities.<sup>44</sup>

In response to the situation analysis, the National School WASH programme developed and revised guidelines to strengthen WASH facilities in schools, including in terms of accessibility for persons with disabilities.

In 2017, with support from WaterAid, the Ministry of Education (MOE) developed a National School Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene Implementation Guideline, with UNICEF participating in the development process. The guideline highlights the importance of accessibility in water supply, sanitation and hand washing, including in needs assessment checklists and the need to address equity, inclusion and disability in school WASH clubs.<sup>45</sup>

The National WASH Facilities in Schools Design and Construction Manual from the MOE was updated in 2019 with technical and financial support from UNICEF. The main changes from the previous edition of the manual in 2012 are the inclusion of MHH blocks and an emphasis on equity and inclusion for students with disabilities. The designs now incorporate ramps, handrails, raised seats and accessible drinking-water stations, latrines, hand-washing and MHH spaces.<sup>46</sup> The aim is for all WASH facilities to be accessible to both younger and older children with disabilities.<sup>47</sup> A 2018 baseline study, conducted prior to the new standards, found that only 31 per cent of schools in Ethiopia had WASH facilities that were disability accessible.<sup>48</sup> With the addition of disability accessibility considerations in the 2019 national standards, it is expected that WASH facilities in schools are becoming more accessible.



The manual takes a holistic and comprehensive approach to ensure disability is considered across all aspects of WASH in schools – latrines, hand washing, MHH spaces and drinking-water stations. One of the design and construction principles stated in the manual is to address the needs of children with disabilities.<sup>49</sup> The manual requires that school WASH blocks have at least one cubicle accessible for girls with disabilities and at least one for boys with disabilities, as well as an accessible latrine in the teachers' WASH facilities.<sup>50</sup> Safe spaces for MHH are also designed to be accessible with ramps and handrails.<sup>51</sup>

The manual also considers the accessibility of the surrounding environment, requiring that the pathway is accessible to users with disabilities and providing specifications for the superstructure, including door widths and space for manoeuvring.<sup>52</sup> The manual proposes to consult with students with disabilities and their caregivers on the design of accessible latrines, promoting inclusive participatory approaches to WASH facility design.<sup>53</sup>

The guide to School Facilities Management, Operation and Maintenance, developed by MOE with support from UNICEF as a companion to the construction manual, is also inclusive of children with disabilities. The monitoring checklist for school WASH facilities includes questions on the accessibility for girls and boys with disabilities of water points, toilets and hand-washing facilities.<sup>54</sup>

The UNICEF WASH in Schools programme, which included the construction or rehabilitation of WASH facilities in 47 schools in 2019, is aligned with the WASH manual, and aims to construct WASH facilities that are both gender-sensitive, with MHH spaces, and disability accessible.

**Figure 6. Tsege Getahun, 17 enjoying her learning environment in school**



*Tsege Getahun, 17, was born with a physical and speech impairment in Eritrea. Fleeing conflict with her family, she now lives with her mother in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. "I was a few years late starting school, but I really enjoy my classes and learning".*

## Lessons learnt

- The UNICEF WASH and MHH programmes have engaged children with disabilities through the hygiene clubs and organizations of persons with disabilities via advocacy events, an MHH advocacy task force, participation in a WASH situation analysis and the MHH capacity-building programme. In addition, organizations of persons with disabilities have been engaged in the national-level COVID-19 response through the public health technical working group.
- While UNICEF has committed to participatory approaches and has sought ways to engage children and adults with disabilities, one challenge for the WASH programme has been engaging organizations of persons with disabilities from the beginning of programmes to inform the design, planning and implementation of the programmes.
- As recommended by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, disability accessibility should be

included in national standards in order to be considered in construction projects.

- Only a third of WASH facilities in schools were accessible in 2018.<sup>55</sup> With the revision of the WASH in Schools construction manual to include accessibility, this proportion should increase. It is expected that the increase in accessible WASH facilities in schools will also contribute to a reduction in out-of-school and school dropout for children with disabilities.
- A field assessment by the Ministry of Health found that no health posts assessed had accessible latrines.<sup>56</sup> This assessment informed the 2012 Design and Construction Manual for Water Supply and Sanitary Facilities in Health Institutions. In the manual, the illustrations and Bill of Quality for latrines cover accessibility features, including ramps, handrails, door widths and raised seats.<sup>57</sup> However, accessibility for persons with disabilities is not specifically mentioned in the minimum standards or design criteria.
- In emergencies and crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, when information is not made accessible for persons with disabilities, they become more vulnerable and face exclusion and limited access to services. UNICEF and partners are working to make COVID-19 and hygiene information accessible to persons who are blind and deaf.
- Crisis can also create opportunities for innovation and to build back better. The consideration of children with disabilities in the innovative hand-washing stations have ensured that this innovation does not create additional barriers to hand hygiene for children with mobility impairments.
- Many girls with disabilities are not in school. UNICEF aims to include girls with

disabilities in MHH activities in school and conducts outreach activities to reach girls with disability in the community, to reduce the gap in MHH awareness and information for girls with disabilities in and out of school.

## Next steps

The UNICEF WASH programme in Ethiopia has plans to scale up work on disability inclusion through partnerships and creating systems for accountability, as well as institutionalizing disability inclusion in the WASH sector.

UNICEF has established a partnership with the Population Media Centre to develop and roll out a gender and disability transformative WASH approach. The aims of the partnership are to develop a WASH package that will be produced in both sign language and Braille and a checklist for all WASH intervention areas with key things to consider, including those related to disability inclusion and gender equity. Capacity-building training on the WASH package and the checklist will be provided to WASH actors from the government and civil society. The partnership will also support UNICEF to produce any WASH mass media in sign language. A cross-sectoral partnership with the Girl Effect, encompassing education, nutrition, WASH and child protection, will also use sign language in television productions and mass media campaigns to address a range of social issues affecting girls in Ethiopia.

UNICEF is working with partners to develop a monitoring and accountability framework for the WASH sector. The framework aims to monitor impact and develop accountability measures on whether national WASH policies and strategies are having an impact at the community level on persons with disabilities as well as women and girls. The framework will also monitor whether WASH knowledge from capacity-building

programmes, such as 'Train the Trainer', are trickling down to persons with disabilities in the community.

To strengthen disability inclusion in WASH policies, UNICEF is advocating for the Design and Construction Manual for Water Supply and Sanitary Facilities in Health Institutions to be revised to be more disability accessible across sanitation, hand washing and water supply.

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guidance from Bisi Agberemi, UNICEF WASH Specialist.

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