



Supporting Children with Disabilities' Rights to Education Through Disability Accessible WASH in Guinea-Bissau

SUMMARY

In Guinea-Bissau, where children with disabilities face significant barriers to access education, UNICEF is working with the government, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and disability partners to create school environments where children with disabilities can learn, participate and access WASH services at school hygienically and with dignity. To improve WASH facilities in schools at scale, including strengthening disability accessibility, UNICEF supported the government to develop National Standards for WASH in Schools. The National Standards and associated training manual include disability accessible specifications for hand-washing stations, drinking water and latrines in schools. To assist in the implementation, UNICEF trained approximately 3,000 teachers on the standards.

The introduction and implementation of National Standards that include disability accessibility, combined with initiatives in schools such as inclusive hygiene clubs, has helped reduce some of the WASH-related barriers that prevent children with disabilities from enrolling in and attending school.

Context

A UNICEF Situation Analysis of Children's Rights and Wellbeing in Guinea-Bissau, 2019 observed that, although Guinea-Bissau signed and ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2014, demonstrating a commitment to the rights of persons with disabilities, this was yet to be translated into specific policies or plans.¹

Children and adults with disabilities face significant barriers in Guinea-Bissau due to stigma and negative social norms. Children who are considered different, including children with disabilities, may be ostracized due to beliefs that they are a reincarnation of bad spirits and capable of witchcraft.² Many parents do not register the birth of children with disabilities, instead abandoning them or hiding them within their homes.³ A study in 2019 that looked at violence against children with disabilities in four cities in Guinea-Bissau

found that at least 80 per cent of the cases of infant and child abandonment were due to the child having a disability.⁴

The Committee on the Convention on the Rights of the Child stated in their concluding observations (2013):

BOX 1.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS OF THE COMMITTEE ON THE CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD, 2013⁵

The Committee is concerned about discrimination against and social exclusion of children with disabilities, who are faced with considerable difficulties within the family, the community and the social system, lack of respect for existing legislation and lack of specific legislation prohibiting discrimination against children with disabilities.

In this context of exclusion, stigma and discrimination, children with disabilities face many barriers to accessing an education. It is estimated that at least 59 per cent of children with disabilities do not attend school.⁶ Apart from the social stigma, there is also a lack of accessibility of school infrastructure, including sanitation facilities.⁷

UNICEF is working with the government and WASH and disability partners to create school environments where children with disabilities can learn, participate fully, and access water and sanitation at schools hygienically and with dignity.

Figure 1. Usher (7 years old), a first-grade student with a physical disability, attends an inclusive, child-friendly school in Oio Region, Guinea-Bissau



KEY DEFINITIONS:

Persons with disabilities: *Persons who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments, which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.*⁸

Accessibility: *Persons with disabilities accessing, on an equal basis with others, the physical environment, transportation, information and communications, including information and communication technologies and systems, and other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and rural areas.*⁹

Disability-inclusive WASH in schools

Disability accessible WASH in school infrastructure

In Guinea-Bissau, WASH in school infrastructure has been made accessible for students with disabilities. UNICEF has directly supported the construction of WASH infrastructure in 27 schools in collaboration with a partner organization, Humanity & Inclusion (HI), which specializes in disability, to ensure that the facilities are accessible for children with disabilities.

As part of this collaboration, in 2016 the WASH in schools infrastructure designs were tested and refined by HI. UNICEF developed WASH in school designs with HI and made recommendations on how to make the infrastructure accessible for children with different types of disabilities, including mobility, vision and intellectual disabilities.

To address the needs of children with disabilities, specifically those with mobility and vision impairments, key recommendations for the designs were to add handrails for ramps and to have cubicle doors that open outwards to allow space for wheelchair users to manoeuvre.¹⁰ In addition, it was recommended that the designs provide more detailed specifications, such as the type of taps for hand washing, the type of door handles, heights of toilets and types of flooring, to strengthen accessibility for children with mobility disabilities.¹¹

While reviewing the UNICEF WASH in schools documentation, HI found that accessibility components and Universal Design^{i,12} considerations were included as an annex to contracts with construction

ⁱ Universal Design is the design of products, environments, programmes and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent

companies. Accessibility information was also shared with the engineer to inform the Terms of Reference. However, while accessibility was referred to in the initial construction manual for latrines in schools, accessibility considerations were not included in the technical specifications of the manual, instead being provided in an annex.¹³ This was an important learning for the project: that disability accessibility should be both a principle and integrated throughout the technical specifications. Providing separate disability accessible WASH infrastructure specifications as an annex risks these designs being overlooked.

As part of the review of compliance with the new accessible WASH infrastructure specifications, HI visited seven UNICEF-supported schools in 2017, two of which were for children who are deaf. The assessment team for the accessibility of WASH facilities included persons with disabilities.

The assessment confirmed that the schools visited complied with the technical specifications for installation of handrails and correct positioning of the doors for easy access.¹⁴ For enhanced accessibility in schools with children who are deaf, the team recommended that there should be improved signage to assist in better identification of latrines and classrooms.¹⁵ This should also be incorporated in the technical specifications for disability accessible WASH infrastructure.

The involvement of persons with disability as part of the assessment team was identified as a key learning and important aspect of disability-inclusive WASH programming, to enable them to define their needs and identify solutions, including the construction of accessible and user-friendly infrastructure.¹⁶

possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.

HI's assessment of UNICEF and partners' WASH in schools programming had the following observations as highlighted in Box 2.

BOX 2.

HI'S ASSESSMENT OF UNICEF AND PARTNERS' WASH IN SCHOOLS PROGRAMMING

The project interventions have the potential to bring about positive change in the lives of beneficiaries. As they introduce important [WASH] infrastructure in the communities, it serves as the beginning of learning about the necessary hygiene practices and a culture of inclusion. For some of the schools, these will be the first toilets built. The fact that they have accessibility elements constitutes a potential value to help build a culture of inclusion. People's testimonies about the project's influence on the greater entry of children with disabilities into the Oio region attest to this.

- *Humanity & Inclusion, 2016*¹⁷

The disability accessible design considerations and recommendations provided by HI in 2016 and 2017 have been the foundation for and have continued to inform subsequent iterations of the designs as the WASH in schools programming in Guinea-Bissau has evolved.

ⁱⁱ For more information, see: [GIZ](#) and UNICEF, [Field Guide: The Three-star Approach for WASH in Schools](#).

Figure 2. A student walks past a newly constructed school latrine block with a ramp in Sintchan-Farba, Guinea-Bissau



Disability accessible WASH in schools standards

For the sustainability of disability-inclusive WASH in schools, HI also recommended that UNICEF and partners strengthen disability inclusion and accessibility in national WASH policies and standards.¹⁸ Disability inclusion and accessibility are part of the Ministry of Education's National Standards for WASH in Schools, developed in 2016 with support from UNICEF.

The WASH in schools approach to operationalize the National Standards in Guinea-Bissau follows UNICEF's three-star approach.ⁱⁱ To determine a one to three star rating, WASH in school infrastructure is measured against criteria that include disability accessible considerations:

- Two-star schools have latrines that are child-friendly, culturally appropriate, age and gender appropriate and accessible for persons with disabilities.¹⁹

- Three-star schools have full accessibility to WASH for all students, including children with disabilities.²⁰

Although the Guinea-Bissau National Standards for WASH in Schools were developed and approved in 2016, dissemination did not begin until 2018, resulting in low awareness of the standards. In response, UNICEF has focused on the dissemination of the standards, with the aim that every teacher and school principal understands and applies the standards. In 2020, when training on prevention of COVID-19 was rolled out in schools, UNICEF took the opportunity to integrate training on the national WASH in schools standards.

The WASH in schools training manual, published in 2018 and revised in 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, is designed to support the training of teachers, inspectors and principals on WASH in schools and includes considerations for children with disabilities. The training manual highlights the importance of basic hand-washing structures (such as tippy taps) being accessible for children with disabilities and includes accessibility of drinking water in the WASH infrastructure in school checklist. While the section on menstrual health and hygiene (MHH) highlights the challenges girls with disabilities face, it does not provide any actions to include girls with disabilities in MHH programmes and interventions.²¹

While WASH infrastructure exists in schools in Guinea-Bissau, it does not necessarily meet the national standards, with school principals and teachers lacking awareness of the standards. To increase knowledge, to date, approximately 3,000 teachers have been trained on the standards. Awareness of the standards has also been increased, with principals and teachers using the three-star approach as indicators to assess the WASH

facilities in their school, including accessibility for children with disabilities.

While the WASH in schools infrastructure designs and national standards are disability inclusive, one of the challenges in the implementation of disability-inclusive and accessible WASH in Guinea-Bissau is the supply chain and access to accessible WASH products and components. The UNICEF WASH programme has utilized the squat pans and stool latrines made by Lixil in both schools and communities. The products are made outside Guinea-Bissau and there is not currently a local market offering quality sanitation products. The stool is used in accessible latrines as it is a seat that does not require squatting. As part of a sanitation marketing approach, households in communities have also been able to purchase either the squat pan or stool made by Lixil. Despite being more expensive, many households in the community opted for the stool over the squat latrines as it is more comfortable. This has created a shortage in the availability of stools for accessible latrines in schools, resulting in some school infrastructure not being fully accessible. There are challenges in maintaining a supply of the stools to meet the demand in communities and schools.

Disability-inclusive school hygiene

HI has continued to work with UNICEF to fulfil the rights and needs of children with disabilities, with the partnership broadening beyond WASH into inclusive education. While the partnership between UNICEF and HI now focuses on inclusive education, WASH continues to be considered through inclusive hygiene clubs in schools. HI supports UNICEF in the implementation and capacity-building of teachers, including on disability issues for hygiene clubs. School hygiene clubs in Guinea-Bissau operate in UNICEF-supported schools, including schools

specifically for children with disabilities. The objectives of school hygiene clubs include:

- Educate students on issues related to WASH in schools and communities
- Promote the maintenance and cleaning of latrines, water points, classrooms and school grounds
- Promote good hand-washing practices at school
- Raise awareness through activities in the school hygiene club.²²

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the clubs have focused on prevention of COVID-19 transmission as well as reducing stigma towards people who have had COVID-19.

In Guinea-Bissau, the school hygiene clubs are one of the pillars of the three-star approach. The clubs play an important role in coordinating, facilitating and encouraging WASH in schools and communities.²³ The clubs, including in schools for children with disabilities, provide information and support on MHH.

Although not part of the formal objectives, with the support of HI, the school hygiene clubs have also promoted inclusion and are a mechanism to welcome children with disabilities to school, creating supportive environments for them. There is an opportunity to strengthen the clubs further by integrating disability and the promotion of disability inclusion and accessibility into the school hygiene club guide. HI recommended that the school hygiene clubs and the guide should be used to support and build solidarity for children with disabilities in schools.²⁴

Lessons learnt

- Partnering with organizations specialized in disability inclusion (such as HI) or

Organisations of Persons with Disabilities to assess WASH programmes and infrastructure designs and provide recommendations can have a lasting impact, informing designs and programmes into the future.

- Including persons with different types of disabilities on WASH assessment teams utilizes their experience, perspectives and capacity to strengthen the accessibility and inclusion of WASH services.
- When contracting construction companies for WASH infrastructure, ensure that disability accessibility is consistently referred to in all construction-related materials, with clear specifications.

Figure 3. Sano Embalo, a teacher, teaches girls about menstrual health and hygiene in the small village of Sintchan-Farba in Guinea-Bissau



- In WASH in schools standards, guidance or training materials, ensure that challenges faced by girls and boys with disabilities to access WASH are identified and actions provided to overcome barriers.
- Disability-inclusive WASH in schools standards are critical to institutionalize, at the national level, the inclusion of children with disabilities. Equally important is the

dissemination, roll-out and training of the standards to ensure that teachers and principals are aware of the standards and able to assess whether their school WASH facilities are child-friendly, gender-sensitive and disability accessible. In addition, accountability mechanisms are required to ensure that the standards are enforced.

- Disability accessible WASH facilities in school remove one of the barriers for children with disabilities to attend school. As in the case of Guinea-Bissau, working cross-sectorally, and having disability-inclusive WASH programmes work cross-sectorally with inclusive education, can create inclusive and accessible learning environments for children with disabilities.

- Given the negative social norms and stigma that children with disabilities in Guinea-Bissau face, social behaviour change and campaigns to change attitudes are also required to ensure that children with disabilities can enrol and attend school on an equal basis with their peers without disabilities.

Figure 4. Usher, 7 years old, who has a physical disability is being helped to wash by his cousin in Oio, Guinea-Bissau



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About the Authors

The case study was developed by Megan Tucker, Disability Inclusive WASH consultant, and Aminta Medina, UNICEF Guinea-Bissau WASH Officer, with contributions and overall guidance from Bisi Agberemi, UNICEF WASH Specialist.

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United Nations Children's Fund
3 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017, USA

For more information, please contact: WASH@unicef.org