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ENSURING AVAILABILITY AND SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT
OF WATER AND SANITATION FOR ALL

Mainstreaming equity and inclusion in WaterAid: an overview of key triggers for success and challenges

J. Wilbur (UK)

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WaterAid is an international NGO that has adopted a rights-based approach to reducing inequalities in WASH. WaterAid's journey to mainstream equity and inclusion in its work began in 2005. Since then it has gained valuable learning about what activities and approaches can propel an organisation along this journey and what can inhibit progress. This paper structures WaterAid's learning under four stages of an organisational mainstreaming continuum for equity and inclusion, and includes recommendations for organisations travelling along the same journey.

Introduction and background

Reducing inequalities is core to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Founded on the human rights principles of equality and non-discrimination, the SDGs aim to 'leave no one behind' regardless of ethnicity, gender, geography, disability, race or other status (UN, 2013). Increasingly Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) are moving from a 'needs based' to a Human Rights Based Approach. This constitutes a framework based on principles of equality and non-discrimination, directed towards promoting and protecting these. In practice this means working in countries or regions with the poorest access to water and sanitation, reducing barriers to access and use; supporting duty bearers to be more responsive and accountable to their citizens and strengthening the capacity of rights holders to claim their rights to water and sanitation (Van de Lande, 2015).

WaterAid is an international NGO which focuses exclusively on improving poor people's access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). It adopted the Human Rights Based Approach to reducing inequalities in WASH. It focuses on the elimination of barriers that prevents people from marginalised groups from actively and meaningfully participating in society. WaterAid has been on a journey to mainstream equity and inclusion since 2005 and has gained valuable learning that other organisations can draw on. This paper presents an organisational mainstreaming continuum for disability and ageing (Jones, 2013); what WaterAid has done under each stage to incorporate equity and inclusion in its work, with an explanation of key triggers for success and challenges.

The mainstreaming continuum

Figure 1, a continuum towards WASH organisations mainstreaming disability and ageing in their work (Jones, 2013), can be applied to focus on other excluded groups or persons including gender, caste, ethnicity and chronic illness. This continuum is a useful way for organisations to conceptualise the stages along the journey to mainstream equity and inclusion, and it can be used to plan and monitor progress. Between 2014 and 2015 WaterAid conducted an independent review of its equity and inclusion work to better understand progress made since 2005, and how to ensure that equity and inclusion is fully mainstreamed in all areas of its work (Coe and Wapling, 2015). Review findings demonstrate that WaterAid is currently at Stage B, but that it is taking measured steps to progress to Stage C and beyond.



Figure 1. A continuum towards WASH organisations mainstreaming disability and ageing in their work

Source: Jones, 2013

Stage A – getting started

The first stage is characterised by studies and situation analyses, small pilot projects and advocacy documents (Jones, 2013). During this stage, WaterAid made considerable progress as senior staff championed equity and inclusion. This included the International Programmes Director and the Chief Executive who both had a history and passion for promoting the rights of people in vulnerable situations. This created an enabling environment where small studies researching the barriers that different marginalised groups face when accessing WASH services were carried out. Pilot projects attempting to address those barriers were also funded and conducted (Tesfu and Magrath, 2006 and 2008; WaterAid, 2009; Tesfu, 2008). Reports were shared widely to influence policy and practice within WaterAid and the WASH sector. These pilot projects invariably targeted people who are vulnerable as a separate group, rather than addressing the barriers that exclude them from full participation in society (Wilbur, 2011). The latter is in line with the human rights based approach.

Stage B – developing institutional approaches to inclusion

Within this stage organisations develop strategic plans, carry out awareness raising and advocacy activities, deliver training on equity and inclusion. Inclusive WASH activities are also piloted within a wider WASH programme and inclusively designed facilities are developed (Jones, 2013).

Organisational level

During this stage WaterAid recruited its first Equity and Inclusion Advisor. Equity and inclusion focal persons in each country programme and across different functions in the UK were identified. Led by the Equity and Inclusion Advisor, these focal people collaboratively produced WaterAid's Equity and Inclusion Framework which was grounded in the rights based approach (Gosling, 2009). The framework provided a common understanding of equity and inclusion in relation to WASH; explained WaterAid's approach and established a common set of minimum standards and indicators for the organisation. An awareness raising and skills development training course was also developed with WEDC (WEDC learning materials, WaterAid, no date). These were delivered to 89 WaterAid staff from nine country programmes. Staff from WaterAid partner organisations and community members were also involved in group assignments. For more information on training course content, its strengths, weaknesses and impact, see Jansz et al (2013).

After investing in equity and inclusion awareness raising and skills development training, WaterAid's focus shifted to carrying out action research to more fully understand the barriers that disabled, older and chronically ill people face when accessing WASH in resource-poor settings in Uganda and Zambia; to develop an approach to address those barriers and finally to understand the impact that improved WASH has on the lives of the target population and their families (Wilbur and Danquah, 2015). This research has been highly successful in influencing external stakeholders, including the partners who implemented the action research project. Concurrently WaterAid carried out the Human Rights Based Approach Action Learning Initiative (HRBALI), in which eight country programmes developed and ran projects according to the human rights-based approach principles (WaterAid, 2015b). This project aims to develop skills, tools and approaches in this area. It is generating invaluable organisational learning on how to implement these principles in WASH programmes, and emerging outcomes from the projects are encouraging. For instance

in Madagascar, WaterAid is partnering with the national disability rights organisation, Plateforme Des Fédérations Des Personnes Handicapées De Madagascar. This project aims to 1) improve the social integration of persons with disabilities and promote their rights to water and sanitation, and 2) provide training to local authorities on disability specific laws, standards and rights. Though there has not yet been a significant impact on access to water and sanitation by people with disabilities, applying the rights based approach has had a positive impact on attitudes towards people with disabilities: people with disabilities now have greater access to microfinance and education, as well as increased engagement with the local authorities (Roaf, 2015).

Investment in the action research project and the HRBALI has been very beneficial for the organisation and WASH and disability sectors. However a less positive impact is that WaterAid staff generally equate equity and inclusion with disability inclusion. Staff also tend to see the human rights based and equity and inclusion approaches and activities separately, rather than as mechanisms for dismantling barriers in society that limit access to WASH services for all. By concentrating resources on these two projects, WaterAid did not invest comprehensively in re-training WaterAid and partner staff, or ensuring all WaterAid and partner staff inductions effectively incorporate equity and inclusion principles and approaches. Arguably this led to a decline in understanding of and commitment to equity and inclusion.

Institutional space for equity and inclusion is challenging to maintain. Within a single focused organisation there are competing thematic priorities. At WaterAid there are initiatives on sanitation, hygiene, water quality, social marketing of sanitation, school sanitation, sustainability to name a few. All are important and aim to equip staff to deliver high quality WASH programmes. The equity and inclusion theme must continue to maintain institutional space, but also be mainstreamed throughout all thematic areas.

Country programme level

At the country programme level, there's been a great investment in campaigns and policy messages and some of these have been incredibly successful. For instance WaterAid India developed a handbook on accessible household sanitation services for persons with disabilities which have been adopted and launched by the national Government (Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation, 2015). Though much progress has been made, WaterAid's services and processes are not always fully inclusive. Many WaterAid staff equate disability to an impairment rather than as a human rights concept. Instead of focusing on the impairment, a human rights approach aims to eliminate societal barriers that prevent disabled people from actively and meaningfully participating in society. These barriers are environmental (access barriers in the built and natural environment), attitudinal (stigma and discrimination) and institutional (including a lack of active and meaningful participation) (WEDC and WaterAid, 2013). All of these barriers must be dismantled so that disabled people can participate in society on an 'equal basis with others' (UN, 2008).

Within WaterAid 'access' is often perceived to be physical accessibility of a WASH facility (i.e. installing handrails and a movable toilet seat inside toilets), instead of addressing access barriers on the way to or into the facility (i.e. steps into an 'accessible' school toilet block) (Wilbur and Huggett, 2015). WaterAid and partner staff also tend to construct services that meet the needs of children currently at the school – if there are no children with disabilities attending school at the time of latrine construction, invariably the services are not fully accessible (ibid). This short-term approach is not in line with the Human Rights Based Approach. Furthermore the participation of people who may be marginalised in the programmes is often tokenistic (Coe and Wapling, 2015). Many WaterAid and partner staff believe that constructing accessible WASH facilities represents full inclusion, but this only addresses one of the three barriers to access and use (ibid). None of this is surprising. Addressing access to facilities is easier and quicker than encouraging active and meaningful participation. Donors have also tended to focus on outputs rather than effective approaches which compound a focus on infrastructure.

Country programme and partner level

Transferring knowledge and principles to partners and community members requires confidence. This comes with experience, guidance and support, but initially it is very difficult (Wapling, 2014). The development and translation of key concepts, practical, simple guidance and tools are vital, as well as their availability right at the start of the development of any new approach (Wapling, 2014; Coe and Wapling, 2015). WaterAid's documents and toolkits have tended to be too verbose and theoretical. Consequently advocacy staff have utilised their key messages in campaigns and policy influencing. Programme staff have found them less useful for translating principles into practice so have not always been able to support partner

staff to implement these. Ultimately this means people from marginalised groups are not consistently gaining access to WASH services.

These experiences demonstrate that head offices must never assume that new principles and approaches are applied in every country context. There is a big difference in the world views of people in the 'global north' where there is a long history of human rights campaigning, and in the 'global south' where citizen's action is emerging and constantly evolving. Country programme and partner staff need a lot of support, mentoring and coaching to reflect on their own world views; understand equity and inclusion principles, and how to put these into practice (Wapling, 2014). Incremental steps along the mainstreaming continuum must be celebrated as the journey is long. The length of time it takes to mainstream new approaches must not be underestimated. It is dangerous to do so as this could lead to reduced resources before full mainstreaming is achieved.

Stage C – establishing institutional commitment and practice

During Stage C, inclusive practices are routinely implemented as the norm through staff recruitment, staff induction, analysis, capacity development (with partners and in communities). WASH designs and services are fully accessible and people who are marginalised actively and meaningfully participate in the process. The organisation also partners with organisations wholly made up of marginalised people (such as Disabled Persons Organisations, women's rights groups, minority rights groups) (Jones, 2013).

Examples of where WaterAid has moved into this stage are highlighted above; however progress has not been consistent across the whole organisation. For instance, reviews of WaterAid's equity and inclusion work highlight that WaterAid sometimes speaks "for", rather than "with" people who may be marginalised. Instead, WaterAid should more consistently partner with Disabled Persons Organisation, women's rights and minority rights groups so that people from these marginalised groups can have direct involvement in the development of policies (Coe and Wapling, 2015). This means they can prioritize the right issues and advocate for themselves. This leads to greater understanding of the issues by decision-makers, and then greater commitment and action for change.

Long-term goal: embedding inclusive practices

All policies, practices and procedures and embedded as standard in all aspects of WASH programmes and services (Jones, 2013). Jones notes that there is no evidence that this has been achieved by any WASH organisations globally.

Next steps

WaterAid is completely committed to making a sustained leap along the mainstreaming continuum. It has reducing inequalities at the core of its global strategy (WaterAid, 2015a). Country programmes are currently developing their strategies in line with this. To ensure WaterAid continues to move forwards along the mainstreaming continuum, it will continue to carry out more country programme equity and inclusion reviews to help guide practice. WaterAid is revitalising its training and awareness raising for equity and inclusion, as well as developing an equity and inclusion toolkit and e-learning modules. With a new organisational Diversity, Equity and Inclusion policy WaterAid is also primed to become a more inclusive organisation with a more diverse workforce.

Recommendations

Drawing on WaterAid's experiences the following recommendations are made for other organisations aiming to mainstream equity and inclusion in their work.

1. **Create an enabling environment for mainstreaming equity and inclusion.** Identify or recruit senior level staff to champion equity and inclusion. Identify and develop a global network of equity and inclusion focal persons to drive the agenda forward. These focal people should be supported by champions and be able to influence organizational systems, policies and procedures. Equity and inclusion principles and activities should also be incorporated in all job descriptions, staff inductions and performance management processes.
2. **Fully resource mainstreaming equity and inclusion and do not under estimate the time it will take.** Resourcing includes ensuring 1) staff and partners have the necessary skills, training, tools and support to implement inclusive programmes, 2) that there are ongoing opportunities for skills development and that 3) inclusive approaches and infrastructure is supplied and delivered.

3. **Provide ongoing and consistent capacity development activities for all staff (including partner staff if relevant).** Right at the start of the mainstreaming journey, produce simple and clear definitions and explanations of equity and inclusion principles, and guidance on how these can be put into practice. These should be translated into local languages. Ongoing awareness raising and training on these guidance materials should be delivered.
4. **Strive for active and meaningful participation of groups and people who may be marginalized.** Develop partnerships with organisations wholly made up of people who are marginalized. These organisations can advise organisations on activities, and jointly develop and deliver key messages aimed at reducing inequalities. The extent to which people who are marginalized are actively and meaningfully participating in their own development activities should be monitored and constantly improved.

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Contact details

Jane Wilbur is a social inclusion specialist currently working at WaterAid. She has experience in developing and implementing inclusive water, sanitation and hygiene programmes; carrying out programme reviews and evaluations evaluation, as well as conducting, analysing and disseminating research to influence policy and practice.

Jane Wilbur
WaterAid, 47-49 Durham Street, London, SE11 5JD
Tel: 020-7793-4567
Email: janewilbur@wateraid.org
www: www.wateraid.org