



Project Impact Report

Improving girls with disabilities' access to education and learning progress through safe water, hygiene and sanitation (WASH) in Rwanda.

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Introduction



Approximately 4% of Rwanda's population of children and youth have some form of disability¹. Many face challenges of environmentally inaccessible water, hygiene and sanitation (WASH) facilities with no ramps or handrails, squat toilets and narrow doorways. As a result, many children with disabilities face the option of not using facilities at all or crawling through areas of defecation. Inaccessible facilities also increase the likelihood of injury, illness or disease and remove the ability for children with disabilities to use services with any dignity.

Women and girls are more likely to have a disability, and whilst they may tolerate unhygienic or unsafe sanitation conditions during their early education, many leave when they begin to menstruate². Girls with disabilities are disproportionately affected by poor WASH in schools due to the intersection of their age, disability, gender and poverty. The compounding challenge of substandard WASH services alongside the complex barriers they face when accessing WASH can have a detrimental impact.

The WASH needs of girls with disabilities are evidently in need of attention in a Rwandan context. This project explored the link between non-inclusive WASH and how it affects the ability of girls with disabilities to manage their hygiene and sanitation with safety and dignity in schools, and the impact of this on their education.

1. MINEDUC (2016) A study on children with disabilities and their right to education: Republic of Rwanda
2. UNICEF (2020) Menstrual Health & Hygiene for Girls and Women with Disabilities

Project approach

Implemented by Able Child Africa and our Rwandan partner Uwezo Youth Empowerment (UWEZO), this project looked to innovatively utilise safe WASH to empower girls with disabilities to access mainstream education in Rwanda. The project also aimed to contribute to the Rwandan government's commitment to 'leave no one behind' through the advocacy for disability-inclusive WASH policies and programmes for girls with disabilities in education.

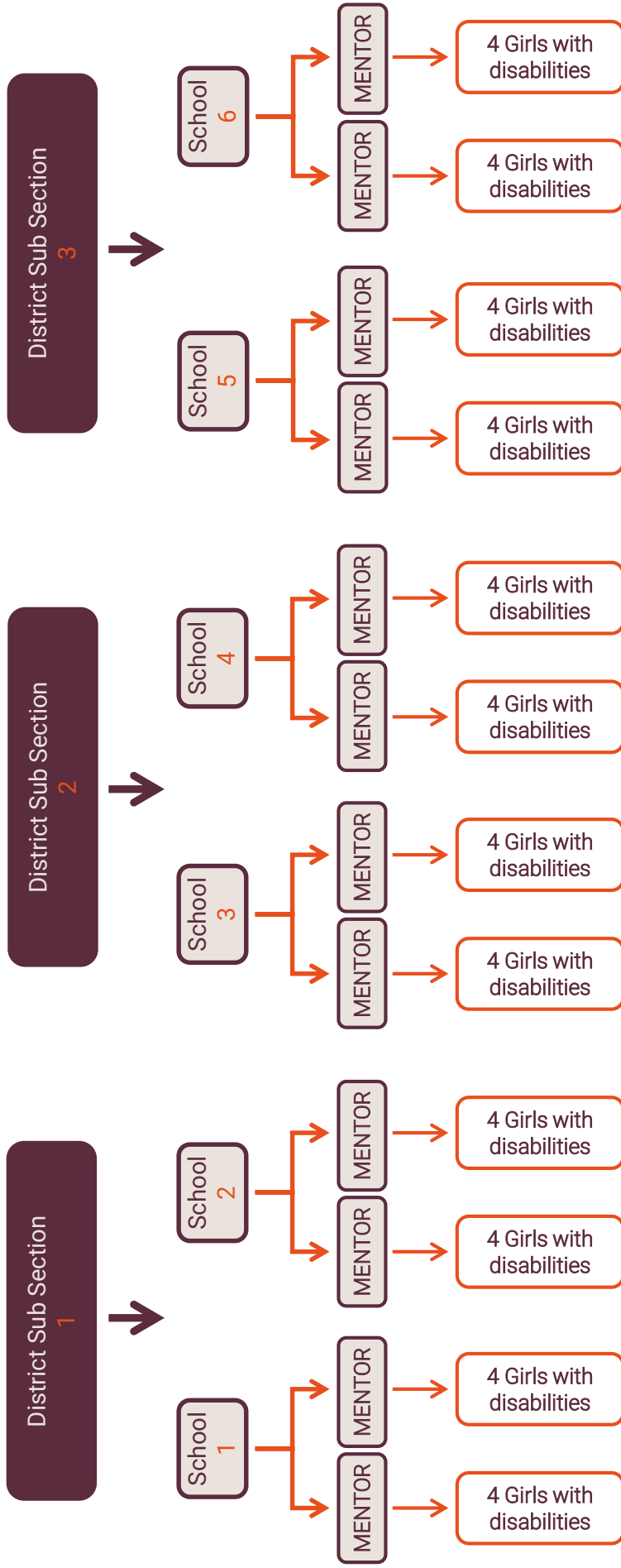
Methodology

This youth-led project identified out-of-school girls with disabilities and trained female youth with disability mentors to design and implement a peer-to-peer mentoring programme using child-friendly resources designed by the girls with disabilities themselves. This programme consisted of individual mentoring at the homes of girls with disabilities and inclusive group mentoring sessions in schools, made up of both girls with and without disabilities, to promote inclusion and break down stigma. The mentoring methodology was designed to enable older female youth with disabilities to share their experiences and offer support to the younger girls with disabilities on WASH-related topics, with a view to simultaneously break down stigma and build the confidence of the mentors.

Key activities

- **Individual mentoring** of girls with disabilities by female youth with disabilities.
- **Group mentoring** in existing school health clubs of girls with and without disabilities
- **Teacher training** on disability inclusion and disability-inclusive WASH.
- **School modifications** to improve the accessibility of hygiene stations and toilets.
- **Provision of hygiene kits** to support girls with disabilities to manage their own hygiene safely and with dignity.
- **Community events** to raise awareness of disability rights and inclusive WASH.
- **Media campaign** to increase wider knowledge and understanding of inclusive WASH.
- **Youth-led production of disability-inclusive WASH resources**, such as comic books.
- **Parent group meetings** to facilitate additional support from families.

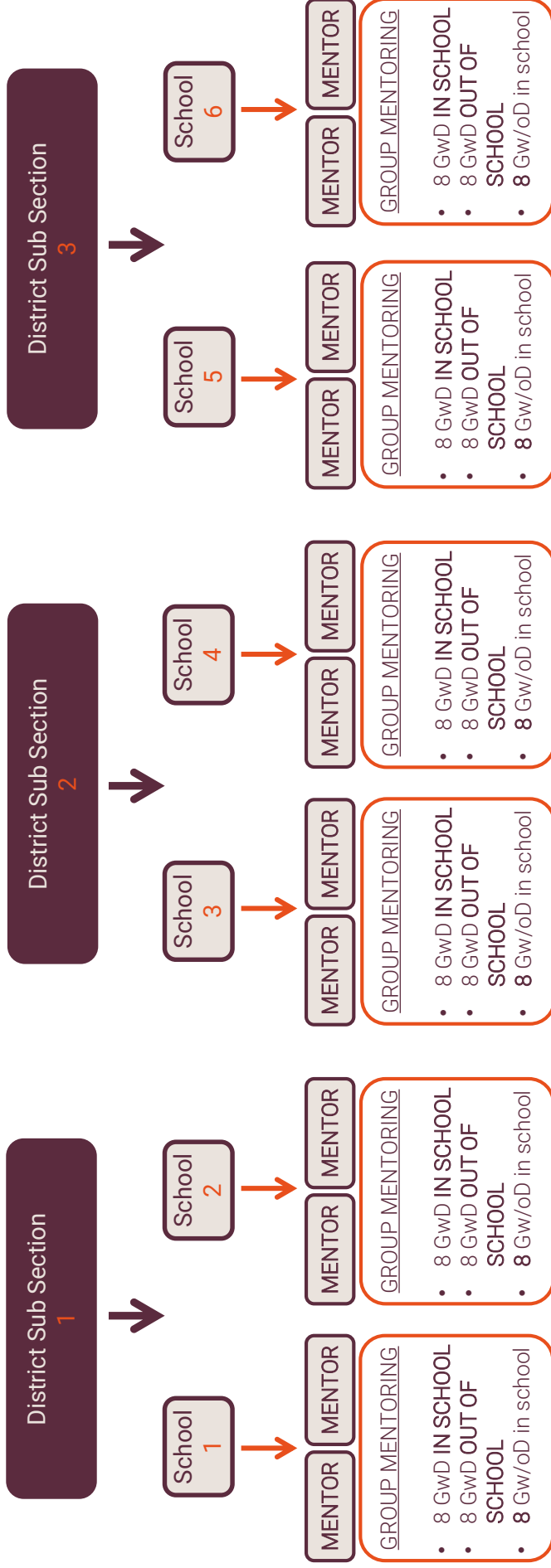
INDIVIDUAL MENTORING METHODOLOGY



Notes:

- Per year **48 OUT OF SCHOOL** Girls with Disabilities (GwD) were provided with individual mentoring
- Per year **12 female YwD** mentors provided **4 OUT OF SCHOOL GwD** with individual mentoring
- Each year a new set of **48 OUT OF SCHOOL GwD** were provided with individual mentoring
- Individual mentoring activities took place mainly at home level but also at school level

GROUP MENTORING METHODOLOGY



Notes:

- Per year 8 **IN SCHOOL** GwD participated in group WASH mentoring
- Per year 8 **IN SCHOOL** Girls without Disabilities (Gw/oD) participated in group WASH mentoring
- Per year the 8 **OUT OF SCHOOL** GwD receiving individual mentoring also participated in group mentoring
- Per year 2 female YwD mentors per school ran the group WASH mentoring in each school
- Each year a new set of 8 **IN SCHOOL** GwD and 8 **IN SCHOOL** Gw/oD participated in group mentoring
- Group mentoring activities took place at school level

Project impact

Over the three years, the project had a significant impact under four key outcomes:



1. Increased capacity to advocate



2. Peer to peer mentoring



3. Accessible and healthier learning environments



4. Informed and empowered communities

1. Female Youth with Disability Mentors had **increased capacity to advocate** for the inclusion of disability inclusive WASH policies and programmes in education.

UWEZO and project mentors stepping up to help girls with disabilities during COVID-19 lockdowns, supporting them with remote education, disability-inclusive hygiene information and providing over 460 hygiene kits to those most in need.

In total, 19 female youth with disabilities mentors were trained in skills such as advocacy, mentoring and inclusive WASH practices.

The peer-to-peer mentoring programme was a continued success throughout the project, with many out-of-school girls with disabilities identified and supported to enrol in school as a direct result of the project.

The final year of the project also saw

Despite the challenges of COVID-19, the project continued to facilitate significant positive impacts, including the continued involvement of male parents and community members, as well as some important advocacy successes such as government commitment to ongoing provision of hygiene kits for girls with disabilities in schools.

2. **Girls with disabilities had better understanding and skills to access WASH in schools and good hygiene practice (including menstrual) through peer-to-peer mentoring implementation.**

The mentors provided 144 girls with disabilities with regular individual mentoring sessions focused on inclusive WASH, and also led group mentoring sessions in schools for 144 girls with disabilities and 144 girls without disabilities.

By the end of the project, girls with disabilities demonstrated very high levels of knowledge and understanding of WASH and good hygiene practices, with many of these new practices being implemented both at school and at home.

3. **Schools became more accessible and healthier learning environments for girls with disabilities in Rwanda through improved accessibility and promotion of good WASH for stated commitments.**

During the project, four of the six project schools underwent modifications meaning that toilets and handwashing stations are now fully accessible to all students, both with and without disabilities.

As a result of the project's advocacy, additional funding was secured for modifications for the other two schools.

The accessibility of each school was determined by environmental assessments carried out by people with disabilities, who visited the school's WASH facilities before and after modifications to ensure the work was relevant to the needs of girls with disabilities.

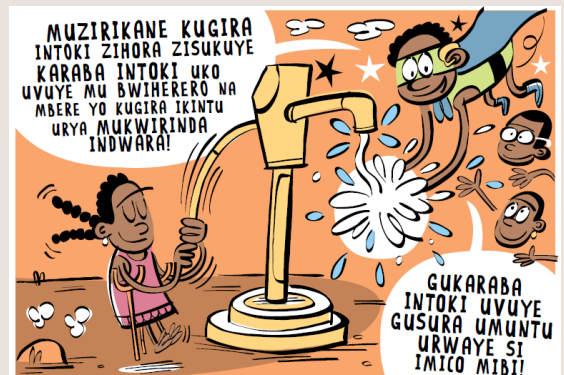
4. **Informed and empowered communities had increased capacity to demand improved supply and use of WASH services to support girls with disabilities to access education.**

Local communities were invited to awareness raising events such as community meetings and theatre productions. These highlighted the challenges faced by girls with disabilities and demonstrated how best to support these children to access inclusive WASH in order to remain in school. Other activities included highly successful radio shows and inclusive WASH messages, which were announced in communities via a radio car.

Communities showed increased capacity to demand inclusive WASH for girls with disabilities, supporting with the identification of new girls with disabilities in their communities, with some reporting that they are implementing their own solutions to support girls with disabilities to overcome challenges related to their WASH access.

Other project impacts included:

- Provision of 288 hygiene kits containing personal hygiene items such as soap, toothbrush and toothpaste and sanitary items. Using the contents of the kits, the girls with disabilities were shown how to correctly use each item by the Female Youth with Disability Mentors.
- 100% of Female Youth with Disability Mentors reported feeling more empowered in comparison to the start of the project. Specifically, they felt more empowered to advocate on their own and other children with disabilities' behalf, both in communities and with government.
- 100% of government officials who engaged with project's evidence base stated that they now recognised the importance of disability inclusive WASH in schools.
- 92% of girls with disabilities who were educated on WASH and good hygiene practices through the peer-to-peer mentoring programme demonstrated increased knowledge and understanding of WASH and good hygiene practices, and 90% of GwD demonstrated increased confidence to demand good WASH in target schools.
- Two important resources were created and distributed as part of the project; the first was a disability-inclusive WASH comic, which was updated to include COVID-19 specific hygiene information, for girls with disabilities in accessible formats. Another publication was an Inclusive WASH Mentors Guide, which was co-created with the Female Youth with Disability Mentors. This contains disability-inclusive information on best practices for peer-to-peer inclusive mentoring and was shaped by their experiences and learnings throughout the project.



Comics designed by Marc Jackson.



Case Study

Elizabeth* is a 15-year-old girl with a physical impairment. She frequently missed classes in her lower primary years due to several health issues. Elizabeth therefore did not start primary school until she was 11 years old, alongside much younger classmates.

Despite her late start, Elizabeth's teachers frequently said she was one of the top students and excelled in her studies. However, by the time Elizabeth was in Primary 3 class, she was already a teenager and dealing with her body changing, whereas most of her classmates were not, and she became increasingly ashamed and isolated.

After being identified to take part in the project, Elizabeth began receiving group mentoring as part of the school health clubs. This provided Elizabeth with the opportunity to speak openly about her experiences among peers, as well as receive crucial information about water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and sexual reproductive health. All the information shared was done so in a disability inclusive way, so for the first time the conversation was relevant and sensitive to Elizabeth's experiences.

The open and honest conversations around hygiene and sexual reproductive health have increased her confidence and have removed much of the stigma that she previously felt.

Furthermore, she was given WASH materials as well as education on how to use them correctly, allowing her to better manage her hygiene. In turn, this has all led to her spending more time with her classmates and feeling more included in her class.

Elizabeth now visits other girls with disabilities who are currently out of school, helping them to understand the importance of good WASH practices. She loves her role as a WASH 'hero', saying that she hopes every girl with disabilities can get a chance to access inclusive WASH in the same way she has.

The difference in Elizabeth's confidence is clear to see; she has continued to perform well at school, with constant praise from her teachers. Not only has the programme equipped her with the knowledge and confidence to know her rights when it comes to WASH and sexual reproductive health, but it has created a passion in Elizabeth to share this knowledge with her peers and community.

* The name has been changed to protect the identity of the girl.

Key learnings and recommendations

The creation of issue-focused WASH networks can have significant impact beyond the immediate project scope, demonstrating the influence that a stakeholder-led project can have.

The strong WASH networks and relationships formed as part of the project were integral to ensuring the success of the project in the final year with intermittent COVID-19 regulations in place. This included community members supporting UWEZO to replan community-based activities and to identify which girls with disabilities in the project needed additional WASH and education support during lockdowns. This demonstrated the project's impact not just in delivering WASH items and information, but also in building awareness and enabling these girls to become more valued and included in their communities.

Recommendation

Disability-focused or inclusive WASH programmes should target and reinforce community-based networks to effect attitudinal change and reach girls with disabilities who could otherwise be overlooked.

It is crucial to also include men and boys to support the equality of girls with disabilities in accessing inclusive WASH.

Traditionally, women are expected to be the caregivers of children with disabilities and are expected to support or manage the WASH-related needs of girls. The responsibility of WASH for girls with disabilities therefore disproportionately falls to women. Men typically hold positions of power in communities and can create lasting change around potentially sensitive subjects such as WASH. The Mentors and project team made active efforts to ensure more male community members and parents were involved in the project, liaising directly with male community leaders and encouraging fathers to join the parent groups.

Recommendation

To ensure genuinely gender-sensitive inclusive WASH projects, men and boys must also be targeted as key stakeholders and changemakers.

Universal design principles for inclusive WASH infrastructure are beneficial to everyone, not just children with disabilities, providing genuine value for money.

The project focused on girls with disabilities as one of the most marginalised groups when accessing their rights to hygiene and sanitation. However, the project also uncovered several instances of boys and male youth with disabilities experiencing multiple barriers to accessing hygiene and sanitation in schools. Accessibility improvements made in school toilets and washing facilities had a widespread impact not just for girls with disabilities, but all children in the school. It proved much better value to make these changes across the school, rather than focusing exclusively on facilities just for girls with disabilities, widening the impact of the project.

Recommendation

Inclusive WASH programmes should include budget for accessibility modifications of WASH facilities, and the impacts of these changes used as an evidence base in advocacy-related activities that promote universal design as a more cost-effective approach.

Formal and informal networking occasions offer valuable opportunities for stakeholders to share knowledge and discuss wider issues surrounding inclusive WASH.

Such opportunities were instrumental in embedding real changes in schools. One example includes headteachers and other teaching staff from each of the schools, who met together and organised school exchange visits to showcase improvements made regarding the accessibility of WASH facilities and to discuss ideas. This resulted in wider uptake of initiatives such as electing school WASH champions and setting up health clubs. This was also a key element of the Mentor monthly meetings, where the Mentors shared successes and challenges and worked together to find solutions based on their own experiences. Low-cost knowledge sharing platforms such as WhatsApp groups or continued monthly meetings in free venues has enabled this knowledge to be sustained beyond the project's completion.

Recommendation

Inclusive WASH programmes should include formal and informal stakeholder dialogue activities to facilitate the sharing of best practices and evidence relating to inclusive WASH to be discussed in multiple contexts.

For WASH projects to be genuinely inclusive, girls with complex and psychosocial disabilities, who often represent the 'hardest to reach' groups, must also be considered.

Another key learning has been around the inclusion of girls with complex and psychosocial disabilities. Despite much progress, the project highlighted the difficulties surrounding the enrolment and retention of girls with such disabilities in mainstream schools due to inaccessible environments and a lack of teachers with specialist training. This is an issue highlighted by project staff and Mentors not just in this project, but across Rwanda. While there are some alternatives such as private schools or education and life skills centres, these tend to be too expensive and over-subscribed. As a result, girls with disabilities will fail to access information relating to WASH, with a lack of access to inclusive and dignified WASH facilities can have further negative impact on mental health.

Recommendation

Disability-inclusive WASH programmes must include provisions for identifying and supporting girls with complex and psychosocial disabilities, including additional budget and specific information on such disabilities in trainings and community awareness activities.

Disability-inclusive WASH programmes are more effective when they include elements of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), which take the specific needs of girls with disabilities into account.

Girls and female youth with disabilities are at a disproportionately high risk of sexual exploitation and abuse, and this was confirmed through much of the evidence gathered through meetings and conversations with female youth with disabilities. Disability-inclusive SRHR education is crucial in preventing potential abuse, unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, and is a crucial element for empowering young women with disabilities. When youth do receive SRHR education, the information given is often not disability inclusive and therefore may not seem relevant to them. Ensuring that all WASH projects capitalise on the opportunity to include elements of disability-inclusive SRHR is a vital step in educating and empowering girls and female youth with disabilities, preventing against sexual abuse and allowing them to make informed decisions on an equitable level with their peers.

Recommendation

Inclusive WASH programmes must include disability-inclusive SRHR information, which reflect the specific realities and needs of girls with disabilities.



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