

# Supporting community-based volunteers as a strategy for enabling disability inclusion: lessons learnt from a peri-urban WASH project in Zimbabwe

This case study draws on evidence and experience from World Vision's inclusive Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) project in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe. It shares lessons learnt by World Vision and CBM Australia – which was a technical partner in the project – in strengthening disability inclusion in the project, in particular by establishing and supporting a network of volunteers at the community level who act as local champions and focal points for gender equity and disability inclusion issues.

## Context

World Vision Zimbabwe (WVZ) has been implementing a four year WASH project in Bulawayo and Gwanda, Zimbabwe, since 2014, with support from World Vision Australia and CBM Australia and funding from Australian Aid through the Civil Society WASH Fund. The project's main implementing partners are the two municipal government agencies in each location: Bulawayo City Council (BCC) and Municipality of Gwanda (MoG). The Federation of Organisations of Disabled People in Zimbabwe (FODPZ) – a national Disabled People's Organisation (DPO) which serves as the umbrella body of various national DPOs in Zimbabwe – has also been involved as the project's key DPO partner from the start of the project design process and has led on a range of advisory, training and research processes within the project.

The project is working in peri-urban localities which are economically disadvantaged and lacking water and sanitation infrastructure, despite their proximity to town centres. Before the project started, most homes were not connected to town water or sewerage pipes, with residents fetching water by hand from public standpipes some distance from their home and relying on informally constructed pit latrines. These challenges were exacerbated for people with disabilities who faced additional barriers that prevented them from realising their WASH rights. These include unemployment, higher rates and severity of poverty, a lack of assistive devices and rehabilitation

services, inaccessible water points and latrines, lack of education opportunities, prevailing negative attitudes among community members and leaders, and underfunded and unresponsive government services.

Through the project, WVZ has been supporting BCC and MoG to install and refurbish water and sanitation infrastructure such as water pipelines and public toilets, set up prepaid water metering systems, create demand for WASH services, and raise awareness to change health and hygiene practices. Disability inclusion is a key priority for the project across all these activities, and CBM has supported this work through technical advice, capacity building, mentorship and brokering relationships between WVZ and DPOs. As well as making WASH facilities accessible by people with disabilities, the project aims to promote broader disability inclusion among communities and within local government. One of the main strategies used by WVZ to achieve this has been establishing and supporting volunteer *Gender Equity and Social Inclusion (GESI) Champions* throughout the project's target communities.

***"Even the children of people with disabilities would be stigmatised when they were going to fetch water. If people with disabilities attended a community meeting, their contributions would be ignored."***

GESI Champion,  
Bulawayo

## **The GESI Champions approach**

Based on findings from the project's baseline survey and disability assessment – which were conducted in collaboration with CBM, FODPZ and individual community members with disabilities – the project team identified the need for its community engagement approach to deliberately work with people with disabilities who were often hidden away in households and were unlikely to participate in public gatherings or community-level project activities. The team was also looking for strategies to extend the sustainability of gender and social inclusion initiatives beyond the life span of the project. The project used an existing network of volunteer home-based carers as well as local people with disabilities identified through social services records to recruit a cohort of volunteers who became known as *Gender Equity and Social Inclusion (GESI) Champions*.

A total of 47 GESI Champions were recruited, including both men and women and people with and without disabilities. Volunteers were selected on the basis of having a commitment to learn about gender and social inclusion and willingness to attend regular training, meetings and community activities. Two volunteers were recruited from each 'segment' (local sub-community) within the project target areas to help build existing local knowledge and relationships into the GESI Champions approach.

World Vision worked with FODPZ and CBM to provide training and orientation to the GESI Champions covering disability inclusion, gender equality, WASH, accessibility and community engagement/advocacy strategies. The GESI Champions were then involved in a range of activities, including:

- identifying people with disabilities and conducting a basic needs assessment in their sub-community;

- raising disability awareness through participation in community 'road shows' and in various community meetings outside of the project;
- supporting participation of people with disabilities in the project (and other community processes) by ensuring that they are invited to and encouraged to contribute in meetings;
- distributing information to people with disabilities who cannot attend meetings; and
- testing and advocating for the accessibility of WASH infrastructure and other public buildings such as schools and shopping centres.

Initially, WVZ's GESI Facilitator and Gender Focal Point Persons at the local government authorities were quite closely involved in coordinating the engagement of GESI Champions in project activities. However as the project continued, GESI Champions began to undertake a range of community-level actions more independently, with WVZ, FODPZ and the local authorities' Gender Focal Point Persons playing more of a coordination and capacity development role through refresher trainings, mentoring and monitoring.



*Photo: GESI Champions performing a community drama as part of gender and social inclusion awareness raising 'roadshow' in Gwanda*

## Impact

In 2016 and 2017, WVZ and CBM undertook some qualitative data collection to capture evidence of impact and identify lessons learnt from the project's experience supporting GESI Champions over the previous two years.<sup>1</sup> This has pointed to a range of immediate and longer term impacts which the GESI Champions approach has contributed to, including:

- GESI Champions have experienced a range of personal changes from being involved in the project, including: knowledge about gender, disability and WASH; increased awareness and appreciation of people with disabilities; changing their attitudes and assumptions relating to disability; knowledge of accessible communication techniques; better understanding of the needs and situations of people with disabilities; knowledge of advocacy strategies; feeling excited and passionate about addressing exclusion; and feeling more confident in playing leadership and coordinating roles within their communities. As a GESI

<sup>1</sup> The findings, discussions and quotes in this paper are taken from participatory workshops with sample groups of GESI Champions in 2016, most significant change/impact stories told by GESI Champions and community members with disabilities in 2017, and interviews with other project stakeholders collected throughout project implementation.

Champion from Gwanda said, *"At first I didn't want to associate with people with disabilities but now that has changed"*.

- GESI Champions' efforts to raise awareness of inclusion issues at community meetings and regularly visit the households of people with disabilities have helped to change attitudes and practices and increase the visibility of people with disabilities within communities. Some households have installed entrance ramps to improve accessibility, and some people with disabilities have been permitted (by carers/family members) to leave their home and attend community meetings for the first time. People with disabilities report that parents, carers and neighbours have changed their attitudes and behaviours towards people with disabilities, and that they are now actively included and respected in community meetings and health clubs. One Bulawayo community member who uses a wheelchair said, *"I am now popular. There is no meeting I will not be attending."*
- GESI Champions are now independently advocating for disability accessibility in WASH and other public amenities. For example, in Bulawayo they have undertaken 'spot audits' of water point construction and have convinced engineers to modify construction based on accessible designs which were provided by WVZ. They are also advocating to the council to allocate budget to make the local community hall accessible.
- As local residents, GESI Champions are often already trusted neighbours and community members, and through project activities have been able to identify and build relationships with individual people with disabilities (and their household members). For many GESI Champions without disabilities, this was the first time they had engaged with people with disabilities, and several report forming lasting and transformative friendships with people with disabilities. This in turn is building trust between different groups of community members, including the most marginalised who had previously been isolated from mainstream community and public processes.
- Because of their trusted position within their community, GESI champions are able to mobilise people with disabilities and link them to organisations, such as the National AIDS Council, which are offering projects or services for people with disabilities. Outside of the project areas, these organisations often have difficulty finding people with disabilities and/or encouraging them to participate. According to the Gender Focal Person at Bulawayo City Council, *"They [GESI Champions] are our arms and eyes into the communities"*.
- Government and NGO service providers (external to the project) are making use of the GESI Champions and are now more willing and able to reach people with disabilities. In Gwanda, MoG has said it now intends to consult GESI Champions as a matter of practice whenever organisations come in with a new project.
- Based on these successes, both BCC and MoG have decided to expand and replicate the GESI Champions approach independently of WVZ. This has already

begun in Bulawayo, where the Council has recruited 550 GESI Champions from every ward in the city and worked with FODPZ to provide them with training and orientation based on WVZ's training materials.



***"Personally, I am now confident and competent in my role as a GESI Champion. Previously I didn't know what to do to solve these issues or even how to talk to the relevant officials. Now I know how to approach these officials and confidently present a case. ..."***

***"Because of our official title we can get an audience at various public offices and can influence their delivery of services. For example, I identified a girl with a disability who was not attending school. I successfully arranged for her to get a birth certificate and ID from the Ministry of Home Affairs, and then got the Ministry of Social Welfare to agree to pay her school fees. She is now enrolled and attending primary school."***

Hazel Tshuma, GESI Champion,  
Bulawayo

## **Challenges and lessons learnt**

Some of the challenges experienced by the project along the way, and the lessons learnt from responding to these, include:

- Training materials and formats used with GESI Champions were originally developed for policymakers in the local authorities and might have been overly complex for use at the community level. This content was later revised to have a more practical and grassroots focus on accessible communication, local advocacy strategies and referral pathways for people with disabilities.
- GESI Champions had mixed levels of education; some struggled to remember the content of previous trainings and requested WVZ to provide more regular refresher training and mentorship. This required significant input from the WVZ GESI Facilitator, however this was seen as vital to building up the capacity of volunteers particularly early on in the process. In the second half of the project, WVZ has focused on developing a package of training and reference materials for GESI Champions to take home, as well as pairing new volunteers with more experienced volunteers and supporting exchange visits.

- The economic situation in Zimbabwe was such that many relevant disability or health services in the project locations were either non-existent or lacking funds to operate. This limited the ability of GESI Champions to provide meaningful and beneficial referrals for people with disabilities. Some GESI Champions reported that they felt ashamed that they were not able to offer any material benefits or services to people with disabilities. Collaboration between WVZ and a local CBM-funded rehabilitation program was established part-way through the project, and a number of people with disabilities were able to access livelihood support through that project.
- GESI Champions felt that there were high expectations placed on them by community members. A GESI Champion in Gwanda reported that "*parents of children with disabilities expect handouts so are disappointed when GESI champions aren't offering this*". This is reinforced by a recent history of development projects providing food aid or material handouts (as well as by having international aid donors' logos printed on GESI Champions' shirts). WVZ has made it clear when introducing the GESI Champions to local leaders and in public forums that the GESI Champions are volunteers and play primarily an advocacy and linking role, and this should become less of a challenge as the GESI Champions approach is handed over to the local government agencies.
- GESI champions are using informal methods to identify people with disabilities in their neighbourhoods, which is likely to miss many people with disabilities. There are also anecdotal reports that some people are reluctant or ashamed to be registered as having a disability by GESI Champions. WVZ has provided training on inclusive and respectful language and communication to GESI Champions and other community members, and also aims to build the capacity of community members and DPOs in inclusive data collection through their involvement in project monitoring and evaluation processes.

## **Strengthening inclusive WASH practice**

The experience of World Vision and CBM experience shows that inclusive WASH projects can, and should, take a rights-based approach to inclusion that aims to achieve broad outcomes for people with disabilities – not just in WASH, but also across all community processes and in public service delivery. GESI Champions have been highly effective as part of comprehensive approach to strengthening gender equality and disability inclusion in WASH, and to embedding inclusive practice within the processes and activities of local government and civil society actors. They have also been a key mechanism to enable the engagement and participation of people with disabilities in community contexts where people with disabilities are commonly isolated or excluded from public life, and where relevant disability services and DPOs don't have the resources to engage at the grassroots level.

The following recommendations can help guide practitioners in applying a GESI Champions approach as part of efforts to strengthen inclusion in other WASH contexts:

- Any approach should link with DPOs and involve people with disabilities as trainers, advisors, consultants and decision-makers to help challenge stereotypes and change attitudes relating to disability (as well as reflecting the importance of participation as a principle).
- It is important to also embed inclusion in government agencies and civil society (including DPOs and NGOs) – both for sustainability and to allow GESI Champions to play primarily a coordinating and linking role between stakeholders rather than delivering services or resources.
- Disability inclusion training and awareness messages should be practical and relevant to GESI Champions' local context – for example, by covering practical and low-cost accessibility and communication strategies for community meetings, rather than recommending physical modifications or the hiring of interpreters (which would better suit agencies which have more resources).
- Make sure that GESI Champions feel adequately supported and motivated in their roles, e.g. by providing reference materials and resources to take home and certificates and allowances for attending training; providing follow-up/refresher training and mentorship; and pairing new volunteers with more experienced GESI Champions.
- Facilitate regular reflection and mutual support meetings or other processes to help GESI Champions share challenging cases and develop responses to issues arising in their communities.
- Establish links with relevant service providers and make sure that GESI Champions are kept up to date with current referral pathways and project or service opportunities. Text or online phone messaging services can be an effective method of distributing information among volunteers.
- Set clear roles and responsibilities for GESI Champions and make sure these are publicly communicated – particularly in contexts where there is a recent history of food aid or other material assistance. This should make it clear that GESI Champions are volunteers and primarily play advocacy and linking roles.
- Allocate dedicated resources to support and build the capacity of GESI Champions to function sustainably. Having a GESI Facilitator on staff enabled WVZ to provide intensive support to GESI Champions and manage relationships with government agencies, DPOs and other stakeholders, without distracting from other components of the project. At the same time, it is also crucial that disability inclusion is mainstreamed into other project sectors and roles.

***"I am so happy now because I have friends, including people without disabilities, who come to my house to chat, give advice or ask me for advice, ask me what I've been doing... just like any other community member. Now I feel human."***

Georgina Chipangu, community member who has a physical disability, Bulawayo

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*Photo: GESI Champions, along with representatives from the Municipality of Gwanda, at a training workshop in Gwanda*



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