

Social inclusion in WASH systems strengthening

A framework

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The distribution of power and resources (wealth, opportunity, capability) is fundamentally unequal. Social justice actions seek to build, strengthen, and connect systems to achieve justice for all or dismantle those systems that perpetuate injustice. Whether intentional or inherited from societal structures, inequalities undermine the foundations of a healthy and prosperous society.

Putting gender and social inclusion (GESI) at the heart of systems thinking is the only way to address inequalities and discrimination based on race, gender, socio-economic status and other grounds. IRC supports countries to build strong local and national water, sanitation and hygiene services, underpinned by resilient systems. We know that we cannot build thriving communities or deliver meaningful services if we fail to integrate the fundamental attributes of social inclusion in our systems praxis. We then continue to tolerate social injustice or remain blind to it.

If we are unable to galvanise others around the moral imperative of social justice, the human rights framework provides a compelling legitimate legal mandate to take action. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights empowers us with the authority and conviction to hold both ourselves and others accountable. It is a key driver for achieving social justice and a fairer world.

On July 28, 2010, “the Human Right to Water and Sanitation” was formally acknowledged in General Assembly Resolution 64/292, and passed by consensus in 2015.

Box 1 Important definitions

Social inclusion is “... the process by which efforts are made to ensure equal opportunities – that everyone, regardless of their background, can achieve their full potential in life” (UNOPS 2021).

“Systems are the networks of people, organisations, institutions and resources (the “actors” and “factors”) necessary to deliver services. They include both hardware and software; management and governance.”¹

¹ Source: [IRC's Systems Approach Key-Resources](#)

The human right to water entitles everyone to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible, and affordable water for personal and domestic use. States must also ensure without discrimination that everyone has physical and economic access to sanitation, in all spheres of life, which is safe, hygienic, secure, socially and culturally acceptable, provides privacy and ensures dignity. (UN Water)

Human rights are a set of global principles that guide and set standards for development by providing a universally accepted framework. **These are fundamental rights and freedoms inherent to all individuals, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, gender, religion, or any other status or identity.** Human rights are international law, laid down in various treaties and declarations. There is global consensus on the meaning of human rights, including the rights to water and sanitation. The interpretation of its terminology and legal clauses is acknowledged across many (international) declarations, resolutions and court cases (Roaf, 2024). These interpretations of international human rights law are intended to guide alignment with domestic laws.

An array of gender and social inclusion frameworks provide a structured way to analyse approaches and is aligned with the inclusivity principles of the human rights framework, with a particular focus on the inclusion of women.

It is imperative that we work on translating these international commitments to reach those at risk of being left behind, through relevant country legislation, policies and programmes.

For safe and sustainable services to become a reality for everyone, the following human rights principles need to be embedded in water, sanitation, and hygiene systems strengthening activities at all levels:

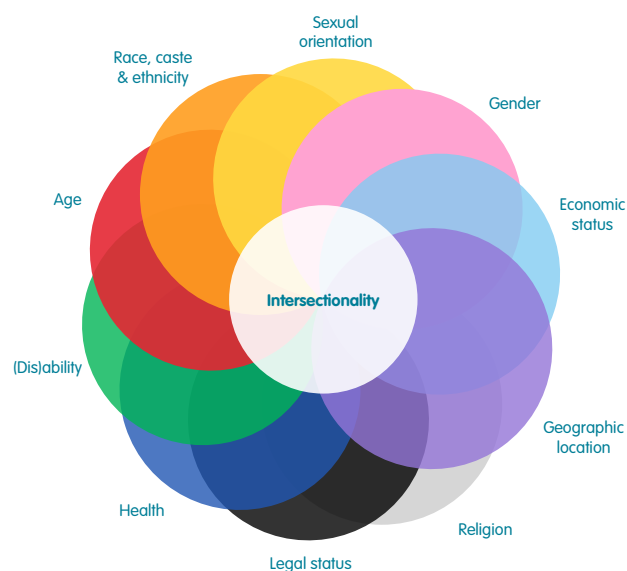
- Non-discrimination and equality
- Participation
- Right to information (transparency)
- Accountability
- Sustainability (non-retrogression)
- Take steps, using the maximum available resources (SWA, 2023)

These principles are not optional checkboxes; they represent binding legal obligations that must be fully realised and upheld.

WHO ARE EXCLUDED FROM SERVICES?

People are not accidentally at the margins or left behind: they are actively excluded by systems of power (IRC, 2023). Certain factors like gender, race, class, sexual orientation or disability put people at risk of marginalisation and often result in exclusion from basic services like water, sanitation but also housing, health, or a safe environment (see Figure 1.).

Figure 1: Visual representation of overlapping social identities.



WHAT DOES SOCIAL INCLUSION LOOK LIKE IN SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING? TAKING A BUILDING BLOCKS LENS.

IRC is using a set of nine building blocks to break down the complexity of water, sanitation, and hygiene systems. The following framework outlines the aspects that need to be in place within each building block for inclusive and rights-aligned water, sanitation, and hygiene systems to be realised.

POLICY AND LEGISLATION

Essential

- Human Rights to water and sanitation are translated into national level legislation and policy.
- WASH policies, standards and guidelines address GESI-related needs and have relevant provisions for the same.
- GESI targets/goals (e.g. reduce gender gap) are stated at national/ sub-national levels.
- Multi-stakeholder engagement is part of policy development and formulation.
- Processes are defined to enable participation, especially of those marginalised at various stages of decision making.
- For effective implementation of policies, legislation, and programmes, GESI-related processes are clearly stated.
- Mechanisms are defined to communicate demands, feedback, suggestions from communities and other stakeholders (community representatives/ CBOs/CSOs) to inform policy formulation.

Desirable

- International policies on elimination of discrimination (such as Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) are ratified.
- Policies actively promote women's and other marginalised communities' leadership and participation.
- Relevant policies beyond WASH (education, social protection, social justice, etc.) actively promote participation of women and other marginalised groups.
- Policy makers engage with local/regional/national rights holders groups (e.g. women's empowerment organisations) to learn from their experiences on gender equity goals as culturally/contextually defined.

INSTITUTIONS

Essential

- Institutions, including ministries, line departments, elected governments, and civil society organisations ensure representation, or even participation of women and other marginalised communities, in all processes (policy formulation, planning, decision-making, implementing, monitoring, and more) and multi-stakeholder platforms (with the help of quotas, dedicated spaces, collaborations with rights holders organisations) across all levels and functions.
- Capacity building and training initiatives to encourage and facilitate participation of women and other marginalised communities exist.
- An environment for raising awareness and sensitisation of the wider community (such as duty-bearers, service providers, CSOs, media, business, policy makers and population at large) against discriminatory practices and on the importance of GESI is created through education.
- IEC and behaviour change communication materials developed need to be aligned with the GESI approach.
- Barriers to participation (in the workplace/ platforms/ meetings) are addressed through investments in childcare, enabling infrastructure such as ramps and toilets, scheduling meetings at convenient times and locations, and so on.

Desirable

- Capacity development on tools such as GESI-responsive budgeting is carried out.
- Trainings are provided to women and members of marginalised groups on rights, duties, and opportunities to make their voice heard.
- GESI is considered in intra-organisational policies, such as increasing team diversity, promoting leadership by members of marginalised communities at different levels, providing career enhancement opportunities for women and other marginalised groups in the workforce (certifications, trainings, professional enhancement, exposure, creation of opportunities).

PLANNING

Essential

- Inclusive and participatory (multi-stakeholder) planning processes exist at key (administrative) levels in government and non-government organisations, enabling members of marginalised groups to participate meaningfully.
- The plans to ensure equitable access, with specified targets, timeframes and responsibilities.
- The inter-departmental planning to leverage other development programmes specific to marginalised communities to ensure holistic provision of services.
- Plans to address the impact of climate change on marginalised communities (such as basic services for the urban poor, who face (first/most) challenges of water being too much, too little and/or dirty and sometimes too expensive).

Desirable

- Planning processes are participatory across all levels.
- Periodic review and improvement of action plans are carried out with a GESI lens.
- Community representatives, CBOs/CSOs are involved in the periodic reviews.

FINANCE

Essential

- There are dedicated budgets for equitable and accessible WASH services to reach everyone (including capital expenditure, operation and maintenance, direct, and capital maintenance costs).
- Affordable tariffs (price benchmarking) of services, providing support (subsidies) to low-income households is ensured.
- There are dedicated budgets for institutional strengthening on GESI, such as for capacity building, and awareness raising.
- Dedicated resources exist to facilitate participatory planning and decision-making (such as childcare support/ facilities, transport allowance).
- There are dedicated budgets to address the impact of climate change, disaster preparedness for women and marginalised communities.

Desirable

- Budget tracking exercises by community representatives or civil society organisations are undertaken to capture allocations and expenditures to address inequalities in access to services.
- GESI responsive budgeting processes are adopted across different levels of governance (from local to central).
- Budgets are available and utilised to ensure a GESI workforce (training, capacity building) in institutions.
- Subsidies (taxation), incentives, and support are provided to encourage businesses led by members of marginalised communities.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND SERVICES

Essential

- Infrastructure planning and development processes include the participation of women and marginalised communities to incorporate their diverse needs (including climate resilience).
- Necessary linkages to finance mechanisms are included in infrastructure development plans to identify and provide for those who cannot afford infrastructure and services.
- Targeted service delivery to the underserved is prioritised.
- Services delivered to all, especially marginalised communities, are based on established technical standards (ideally incorporating climate-resilient designs).
- Independent monitoring of infrastructure and services is carried out using tools such as social audits and open discussions, through the engagement of independent CSOs and/ or community representatives.
- Accessibility, safety, cleanliness, privacy in design and maintenance of services (including menstrual hygiene management) in institutional and public settings is ensured.

Desirable

- Infrastructures supporting gendered needs and other social needs (such as disability access) are available outside of the home to enable all people to participate fully in society.

MONITORING

Essential

- GESI-specific monitoring indicators are included in WASH service monitoring.
- Stakeholders, like rights holders groups working on rights of women, people with disabilities, and other marginalised groups, are engaged in the monitoring process and in deciding on the indicators.
- Disaggregated data is collected and reported (gender, age, disability and other context-specific vulnerabilities – such as ethnicity, religion, HIV, refugee, internally displaced person, indigenous person status, etc.) to inform planning and budgeting processes.
- Data (including on use of budget) is accessible and available in a usable format.
- Both quantitative and qualitative data (such as participation or engagement of members of marginalised communities in decision-making) are collected.

Desirable

- Data is validated by the stakeholders.
- Qualitative data, such as on household division of labour, asset ownership, social accountability tools used, complaints received and addressed, is collected and used in planning.
- An annual GESI analysis of the data collected is carried out, to identify gaps in service provision, to inform planning and decision-making.
- GESI indicators on WASH are included in the measurement of progress on GESI in the national context (for instance, in terms of empowerment, gender transformation, and social inclusion).
- Available data is aligned with the Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) indicators on GESI, enabling comparison and contribution to the larger global data set.

LEARNING AND ADAPTATION

Essential

- Partnerships are formed between government departments that make policy decisions and implement them, and research and implementation organisations that produce research to inform these decisions.
- Knowledge is created (using data as evidence for accountability) on the differential impact of access to WASH services on marginalised communities.
- Best practices for delivering WASH services to the last mile are documented.
- Sharing, exchange, and peer-to-peer learning take place on good practices on how best to reach the last mile, being intentional about inclusion, and facilitating the same. Plans are periodically reviewed, learnings are synthesised, and the programme is adapted to be deliberate on aspects of gender and social inclusion.

Desirable

- There is a research agenda (funded and implemented) that captures evidence of progress on GESI and access to WASH services – on systemic bottlenecks and/or societal barriers in reaching everyone, capturing unintended harm, for improved decision-making.
- Multi-stakeholder platforms, including rights holders and the private sector, are created to address/educate about GESI.
- Simple language and relatable contextual examples are used to reiterate certain key concepts on GESI and WASH.

REGULATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Essential

- There is a dedicated authority that regulates services (including social and economic aspects of the service) to ensure that everyone, especially marginalised groups, is covered and receives services that meet standards at affordable prices.
- The service provider is held accountable by both the regulating authority and communities/households to deliver GESI-responsive services that meet established standards.
- User-friendly and confidential (where required) complaint redressal mechanisms exist that prioritise complaints from marginalised communities.
- Necessary initiatives are in place to ensure awareness of rights, as well as complaint redressal and escalation mechanisms, enabling service users to demand accountability.
- Social accountability mechanisms, such as social audits, are institutionalised in programmes to ensure accountability in services and decision-making.
- Transparency of plans and budgets at all levels is maintained.
- Monitoring data is publicly available and made accessible.

Desirable

- There is an independent performance review of service authority and service provider functions.
- GESI targets are stated in the contracts of service providers or job descriptions of duty bearers.
- Mechanisms exist to incentivise service providers to invest in addressing inequity.

Essential

- Platforms for information and decision-making around the management and use of water resources include women and marginalised communities.
- Decision-makers, service providers and communities are aware of the differential impact of climate change on GESI and plan accordingly (ensuring availability of infrastructure, services, budgets, human resources).

Desirable

- Capacities on climate change for all stakeholders (community, service providers, decision-makers, policy makers, etc.) with a focus on GESI are built.
- A community cadre (comprising women and youth representatives from marginalised communities) is trained to be able to locally address climate change-related challenges.
- Climate change language is made accessible – easy to understand and relatable – to all.

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About this brief

This framework includes the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) aspect into IRC's building blocks approach for WASH systems strengthening. It uses a GESI perspective in the key components of systems strengthening. This is based on a review of various inclusive frameworks and methods from different organisations and feedback from WASH experts in the One For All Alliance.

Further details are available in the learning note authored by Ruchika Shiva and Shiny Saha, [available here](#).

To learn more about applying the framework, sign up for the WASH Systems Academy course [Gender equity and social inclusion: The basics](#).

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