

STATEMENT BY THE WORKING GROUP ON CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES OF THE ACERWC ON INCLUSIVE WASH FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE THEME OF THE DAC 2026

The 2026 theme for the Day of the African Child "Ensuring Universal Access to Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) for Every Child in Africa" resonating with the African Union's 2026 Theme of the Year on "Assuring Sustainable Water Availability and Safe Sanitation Systems to Achieve the Goals of Agenda 2063," aims to advance the right to life, survival and development, health, dignity and non-discrimination of children in Africa. Despite the aspiration to achieve universal access, Africa is facing a child-survival crisis, with unsafe water and sanitation being the key drivers of preventable child deaths which disproportionately affect children with disabilities, who remain among the most excluded groups in accessing essential services. UNICEF's data as of 2020 provides that 3 out of 5 people in Africa lack drinking water, and hygiene and nearly 3 out of 4 people lack basic sanitation facilities. These numbers, coupled with the low progress of States in achieving Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals on WASH, exacerbate the situation and leaves children's right to WASH in a gloomy situation. Only two countries namely Egypt and Tunisia are on track towards achieving the SGDs aspiration on universal sanitation revealing that progress is too slow.

Poor WASH practices lead to the prevalence of infectious and communicable diseases such as polio, cholera, diarrhoea, schistosomiasis, typhoid, and other waterborne illnesses. Moreover, children who do not have adequate access to WASH facilities are more vulnerable to undernutrition. These challenges pose risk on the right to life, survival and development of children and disproportionately affect children with disabilities. WASH facilities in Africa including those in schools, health centres, and communities, continue to be designed without disability-inclusive considerations. The absence of ramps, handrails, wide doorways, and accessible toilets forces many children with disabilities to either forgo using facilities altogether or forces them to use the facilities with contamination and without dignity as often they may have to crawl through insanitary spaces. Inaccessibility of these services in all spheres results in disproportionately higher rates of malnutrition and infectious disease among children with disabilities in Africa. Moreover, it affects their capacity to attend and continue education as many girls with disabilities are forced to leave at an adolescent age due to inaccessible menstrual hygiene facilities in schools. This exacerbates the already existing very high rate of exclusion of children with disabilities from education. Furthermore, it entrenches the stigma, discrimination and invisibility of children with disabilities in communities.

The Working Group on Children with Disabilities of the ACERWC emphasises on the term "universal" in the theme of the Day of the African Child which carries a firm message that no child shall be left behind. Universal access to WASH signifies the need to adopt universal design in WASH facilities either by ensuring that all facilities are accessible to all children including children with disabilities or ensuring that special accessible facilities are integrated in the mainstream WASH services. The Working Group recalls that inclusive access to WASH is a binding children's rights obligation arising from the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, including the rights to survival and development, health, education, protection from discrimination, and the best interests of the child. In this regard, the Working Group calls on Member States of the African Union to:

- Adopt and enforce universal design standards in all WASH facilities in schools, health facilities, and public spaces to ensure accessibility for children with disabilities including accessible water points, ramps, wide-entry toilet cubicles, grab rails, and appropriate symbols and signals in accessible formats.
- Ensure that universal design is complemented by reasonable accommodation for children whose individual needs cannot be met through general accessibility measures alone.
- Develop and resource disability-specific WASH programs within national WASH strategies, with dedicated budget lines and measurable targets for children with different types of disabilities.
- Ensure the right to dignity in accessing WASH for children with disabilities through constructing WASH facilities which children with disabilities can use safely, privately, and without requiring assistance from others whenever possible, preserving their right to dignity and bodily autonomy.
- Guarantee accessible menstrual hygiene facilities in schools for girls with disabilities
- Undertake extensive awareness raising efforts to address the deep-rooted stigma and discriminatory attitudes toward children with disabilities, emphasizing their access to WASH as a right, not a privilege.
- Integrate disability-inclusive hygiene education into school curricula, family orientation, and community health programmes using accessible tools and inclusive methods for children with various types of disabilities.
- Train WASH programme designers, engineers, teachers, and health workers on disability inclusion, the rights of children with disabilities, and the principles of universal design and dignity.
- Ensure the meaningful participation of children with disabilities in the design, planning, monitoring, and evaluation of WASH programmes and policies by facilitating safe and accessible platforms.
- Enhance accountability through the integration of disability disaggregated data into national WASH monitoring and reporting systems including data on schools, health facilities, child-care institutions, informal settlements, rural communities and humanitarian settings.

The Working Group further emphasizes the need to adopt an 'intersectional lens' in addressing WASH accessibility constraints facing children with disabilities by recognizing the interaction of disability with gender, age, and sociocultural norms as well as in acknowledging the intersection between climate change, conflict and humanitarian emergencies and accessibility of WASH services. Visibility of children with disabilities is a basis for their inclusion, participation, equality and dignity. Hence, the rights and needs of children with disabilities must be systematically reflected in all WASH laws, policies, programmes, budgets and monitoring frameworks across Africa.

Done in Maseru, Kingdom of Lesotho

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