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Systematic improvements in humanitarian WASH services: Uganda refugee settlements

K. Okurut, M. O. Obbo & S. Adoch (Uganda)

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Provision of appropriate water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services is important in reducing morbidity and mortality that are caused by communicable diseases. However, there are a mix of challenges in accessing WASH services in humanitarian situations including vulnerability by age and disability. World Vision Uganda systematically implemented a three-one year inclusive WASH project in refugee settlements in Uganda to improve access for people with disabilities. The project involved engagement of key stakeholders to identify and discuss challenges and reflect on any past experience on similar projects , actual construction of inclusive facilities and conducting participatory accessibility audit of constructed WASH facilities. Lessons learnt in the accessibility audit of one project were keenly integrated in subsequent projects to increasingly improve design, implementation and access to people with disabilities in refugee settlements. Communities increasingly noted improvement in access to WASH and increased enrolment of children with disabilities in primary and secondary schools.

Introduction

Provision of safe water, adequate sanitation and hygienic conditions is very important in avoiding excess morbidity and mortality due communicable diseases that account for most of deaths in complex emergencies (Connolly et al., 2004, Brown et al., 2012). With over 1 billion people living with some form of disability and about 6 million among the 42.5 million people displaced by conflicts, there are serious challenges in accessing WASH services in Refugee camps (Buscher and Pearce, 2014). Refugee crisis is becoming a serious concern due to the growing and continuing conflict and instability, especially in Africa. The situation is straining governments and humanitarian support organisations and may not just require emergency supplies but services that can transform both the refugees and host communities (Garimoi Orach and De Brouwere, 2005). Loescher & Milner (2005) suggest even a broader agenda that extends beyond the conventional boundaries in order to integrate the resolution of chronic and recurring regional refugee problems with economic development.

Uganda has and continues to host refugees from most of its neighbouring countries including Southern Sudan. South Sudan is the world's newest country having gained Independence from Sudan in July 2011 following a 2005 agreement that ended Africa's longest civil war. The young nation however has been engulfed in civil wars just two years after independence, displacing more than one million South Sudanese to the neighbouring countries. About 639,955 South Sudanese refugees have entered Uganda since the December 2013 political crisis. Over 450,000 refugees have entered Uganda since the intense fighting erupted in Juba on 8 July 2016. The influx has put strain on basic services including water, sanitation and hygiene and on the capacity of present WASH actors to keep pace with the response. Local and international humanitarian organisations together with governments have continued to provide various type of support to the refugees. Among the services provided in refugees settlements include water, sanitation and hygiene promotions (WASH).

Through its “Inclusive WASH” approach, World Vision Uganda has systematically raised WASH services in refugee settlements in West and North-Western Uganda. This paper reports on inclusive WASH interventions that were systematically conducted in four districts of Hoima, Adjumani, Arua and Koboko by

World Vision Uganda between 2015 and 2017, to improve access to WASH services in refugee settlements. The paper points out how systematic WASH interventions in refugee settlements can cause positive impact in the social wellbeing of persons with disabilities in refugee communities.

Methodology

World Vision works with children, families and communities in different geographical characteristics including in emergency situations. With support from Government of Finland and other partners, World Vision Uganda ran three one year projects in the districts of Hoima, Adjumani, Arua and Koboko. Each of the projects aimed at improving access to water, sanitation and hygiene while taking into account the physical challenges of people with disabilities (PWDs). Access here being referred to as “the possibility to reach a place and manoeuvre within it; use a service, receive information, participate in activities provided in a public place; all these on equal basis with others, with dignity, independence and safety (UNPD, 2010). The project was designed in a way that the lessons learnt from one project is reviewed and used to improve the design and implementation of subsequent project, to ensure that disabled people are on the main road of development even in humanitarian services. The first inclusive WASH project was in Kyangwali refugee settlement in Hoima district and the focus was addressing barriers to access to WASH facilities. Key stakeholders including target beneficiaries were engaged in understanding the barriers before implementing the improvements and a participatory accessibility audit was conducted after the construction and improvement of WASH facilities. The audit was aimed to identify gaps and lessons for improvement in the future projects. It involved assessment of the extent of compliance of the improved facilities with the acceptable standards in terms of the physical aspects of a structure or a service, and the requirements that must be fulfilled to make them accessible to persons with disabilities. The accessibility audit used a case study research design applying both qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative approaches involved conducting individual interviews with purposively selected persons, focus group discussion (FGD) with target groups and observations; while quantitative methods involved physical measurements of the dimensions and sizes provided for PWDs. Details of the procedure for the assessment were provided in the audit tool. The references for quantitative assessments were based on the National Accessibility Standards that provides detailed and comprehensive information on recommended dimensions and sizes for PWDs (UNPD, 2010). The accessibility audit of Kyangwali Inclusive WASH project together with the baseline study of a new project site systematically informed the improvements required in Adjumani and later Arua and Koboko.

Project preparations

Firstly, the project conducted a stakeholder start-up meeting on inclusive WASH in the beneficiary community to identify and discuss the project aims and objectives and take note of any past experience on similar projects, technical and policy guidelines plus other specific uniqueness in the target community. Key stakeholders included representatives from the technical, policy, social and humanitarian organization in the WASH sector. Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MOGLSD); Appropriate Technology Centre of the Ministry of Water and Environment; UNHCR; Actors in the Disability sector (DPOs); WASH Partner agencies in operation in the refugee settlements; WASH contractors and World Vision Field and office staff. The meetings also opened up opportunity for stakeholders to observe technical and policy requirements in the project implement, Inclusive WASH designs, appropriate accessible WASH technologies and gives a picture of the type of facilities expected from the contractors (Jones and Wilbur, 2014).

Also, during the stakeholder start-up meetings, World Vision disseminated its WASH interventions to stakeholders while advocating for inclusive WASH programming among partners. Ideas and comments taken from the discussions informed better programming of World Vision WASH activities in refugee settlements.

A follow-up of the stakeholder start-up meeting in form of sensitization or training of local contractors on inclusive WASH designs and construction as a capacity building measure for the skill and expertise to remain in the settlements for sustainable operation and maintenance of the facilities. Representatives of the beneficiary community were fully involved in all the initial activities and some of their inputs are to identify any specific challenges in the refugee settlements that the project should endeavour to address. Other activities during the preparation include pre-testing of prototypes of assistive devices to provide opportunity

for interaction and improvement of the design E.g. Movable toilet seats limit anal cleansing by the physically handicapped (crippled) beneficiaries.

Construction of WASH facilities

The Kyangwali project directly benefited a total of 400 persons with disability and elderly persons. About 1,500 persons indirectly benefited from the project and these include host communities. A portion of the project budget was to construct facilities that would benefit the host community to create mutual living and bring cohesion between the refugees and host communities in the settlements (Garimo Orach and De Brouwere, 2005).

In Adjumani, the second project was implemented in three settlements camps of Nyumanzi, Ayilo and Alere. Four (4) new boreholes were constructed (Photograph 1 (a)) and 15 were modified to make them accessible for PWDs. Seventy eight (78) stances of drainable V.I.P latrines were constructed (Photograph 1 (b)) including special stances for Children with Disabilities (CWDs), and girls' washrooms. A number of assistive devices such as latrine seats of varying designs, wheel chairs, crutches, knee pads and walking sticks, among others, were provided to PWDs to aid them in their movement and accessibility to WASH facilities.



Photograph 1a. Borehole constructed in host community



Photograph 1b. Toilet constructed in a school within the refugee camp

At the end of the construction / improvement of WASH facilities under the project, World Vision Uganda collaborated with stakeholders from the disability fraternity and line Government Ministries to audit the WASH facilities for accessibility by PWDs.

Participatory accessibility audit of WASH facilities

The accessibility audit aimed to establish whether constructed / improved facilities meet the requirements that must be fulfilled to make them accessible to persons with disabilities. The activity was conducted by a group of experts in the different fields including the beneficiary representative. The team of auditors among others included: experts from MoGLSD, National Council for Disability (a Government institution charged with monitoring the extent to which PWDs benefit from existing legislation, policies and programs in Government institutions, civil society and the private sector); National Council for Disability; Appropriate Technology Centre of the Ministry of Water and Environment; Uganda National Action on Physical Disability; Ministry of Education, Sport, Science and Technology; and the Ministry of Health.

The WASH facilities were physically assessed for accessibility using the tools developed. The assessment was done by the aid of tape measures (for taking measurements), observations, interviewing beneficiaries, some school authorities and some community members (Photograph 2).



Photograph 2. Collection of data during the field work audit exercise in Adjumani, 2016

From every audit report, there were some recommendations for improvement in future projects and these mostly benefited the projects in Arua and Koboko. The idea of organizing a sensitization and training workshop for contractors in accessibility to comprehend the needs and concerns of PWDs came out from observations that some of the dimensions were not adhered to as stipulated in the National Accessibility Standards (UNPD, 2010). The audit also revealed the need for the implementing organization to try as much as possible to retain staffs who have worked on the inclusive WASH project for the benefit of expertise gained.

The audit recommended that before handing over the project, implementing organization should pretest the facilities to make sure that they are usable by everybody with ease, safety, independence and dignity. The feedback from the users to continue to inform future reviews of the design standards and also contribute to the general knowledge on accessibility requirements in WASH within and even outside the entire WASH sector.

Conclusion and lessons learnt

In general, it was noted that where audit recommendations from completed projects were carried on and integrated in subsequent projects during baseline studies, design and construction; the newly constructed facilities were much more accessible. Important to note also was that the targeted refugees had started feeling the impact of the one-year projects as they were now able to access clean and safe water from short distances, improved hygiene as a result of access to Ventilated Improved Pit latrines, and children receiving early childhood education. Enrolment of children in primary and secondary schools (including CWDs) was beginning to increase as a result of availability of appropriate facilities.

By committing a portion of the resources and use of local contractors to improve access to WASH services in the host communities, there is harmonious living between refugees and host communities and creates a path to sustainable development. The achievements and efforts to build capacities of local contractors in WASH services can well diffuse beyond the settlements and across the conventional boundaries in order for change on the causes of refugee influx in the region (Loescher and Milner, 2005, Cronin et al., 2008).

Systematic improvement of WASH services in humanitarian services is one approach that can bring positive impact in the lives of vulnerable persons who are limited by physical disabilities to have equal opportunities for WASH in refugee settlements. Engagement of beneficiary communities and building

capacity of local contractors in inclusive WASH services enhances the sustainability of the project as opposed to hand-outs of relief syndrome in humanitarian services. However, there is need for empirical studies to understand how much of the practice or behavior diffuses or carries on in the community neighborhood and refugees' community of nationality, when they return. This could bring a transformation in the communities for better WASH practices beyond the camp and across conventional borders.

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Contact details

Kenan Okurut
Tel: +256 772 651706
Email: ken_okurut@yahoo.com

Michael Okoth Obbo
Tel: +256 782 346 860
Email: michael.okoth1@gmail.com