



# The Criticality of GEDSI

*for Climate-Resilient WASH*

Water for Women (WfW) is unique in its role as an implementation and research fund that contributes to local, regional and global understanding of best practice in climate-resilient inclusive development. During the 2023–24 extension period, drawing on learnings from the implementation of climate-resilient and inclusive water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) [projects](#) and [research](#) across the Asia-Pacific region, WfW partners sought to explore a fundamental learning question:

### **What does climate-resilient inclusive WASH development look like?**

In exploring this question, three dedicated learning groups considered:

1. How do WASH programs commonly understand climate risk and resilience? How can this be further developed to better inform the design of WASH interventions?
2. How do WASH governance systems commonly integrate climate risk and resilience? What lessons from promising practices can we share to support strengthened climate risk integration?
- 3. Why and how is gender equality, disability and social inclusion critical to climate-resilient WASH?**

This learning brief shares key findings and insights from the third learning group (3) about the **criticality of gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) for climate-resilient inclusive WASH**.

- **The most marginalised in communities are at the frontline of climate change hazards, uncertainty and impacts** – they must be part of decision-making for context-appropriate and sustainable climate resilience solutions.
- **Transformative GEDSI considers the inherent linkages between climate change, WASH, resilience, equity and inclusion** – particularly for marginalised populations who experience intersectional disadvantages.
- **Social, habitat, institutional, financial and technical barriers** to participation and access are compounded by climate change impacts on WASH services. However, it is possible to shift these barriers to become enablers.
- **Inclusive and accessible WASH approaches increase coping mechanisms and adaptive capacities**, providing a multiplier effect that benefits everybody and supports positive outcomes beyond WASH.
- **Climate risk-informed and inclusive approaches built into WASH services and systems are key enablers** for effective community and climate resilience outcomes.

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## Abbreviations

CBO	Community-Based Organisation
CFAR	Centre for Advocacy and Research, India
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
OPD	Organisation of People with Disabilities
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GEDSI	Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion
IRC	International Rescue Committee
IWMI	International Water Management Institute
LLEE	Live & Learn Environmental Education
LSHTM	London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine
PNG	Papua New Guinea
RHO	Rights Holder Organisation
UTS-ISF	University of Technology Sydney - Institute for Sustainable Futures
WASH	Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene
WfW	Water for Women

# Introduction

Water for Women (WfW) is an implementation and research fund that is uniquely placed to contribute to local, regional and global understanding of best practice in climate-resilient, inclusive water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) development. Under WfW's collaborative [Learning Agenda 2023–24](#),<sup>1</sup> drawing on learnings from the implementation of climate-resilient and inclusive WASH projects and research in the Asia–Pacific region, WfW partners sought to explore a fundamental learning question: **What does climate-resilient inclusive WASH development look like?**

Equitable WASH access is a cornerstone of what makes people resilient – a precondition for good health, nutrition, education and livelihood outcomes. Simultaneously, resilient people are integral to making WASH systems, infrastructure and services more climate-resilient. **Gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) is critical to climate-resilient WASH – but why, and how?**

Water for Women sought to explore this question by considering three more specific questions:

- **Within WASH systems, what structural barriers need to be removed to ensure that gendered, social and economic inequalities are addressed?**
- **What pathways are different actors using to transfer power and progress transformation towards climate-resilient inclusive WASH systems and services?**
- **What are the linkages between inclusion, transformation and climate-resilient WASH?**

In seeking to collect evidence about the criticality of GEDSI and how greater equity contributes to climate-resilient WASH and community resilience, WfW partners aimed to identify those with least access to WASH services and decision-making, and the particular barriers they face. They also sought to understand more about how gatekeepers, change agents, those with power, and rights holders themselves can make the changes required, and the change that can occur as a result. The findings indicated that diverse voices in decision-making are needed to achieve climate-resilient inclusive WASH outcomes ([Figure 1](#)), and were used to identify stepping stones and pathways towards climate-resilient inclusive WASH ([Figure 2](#)).

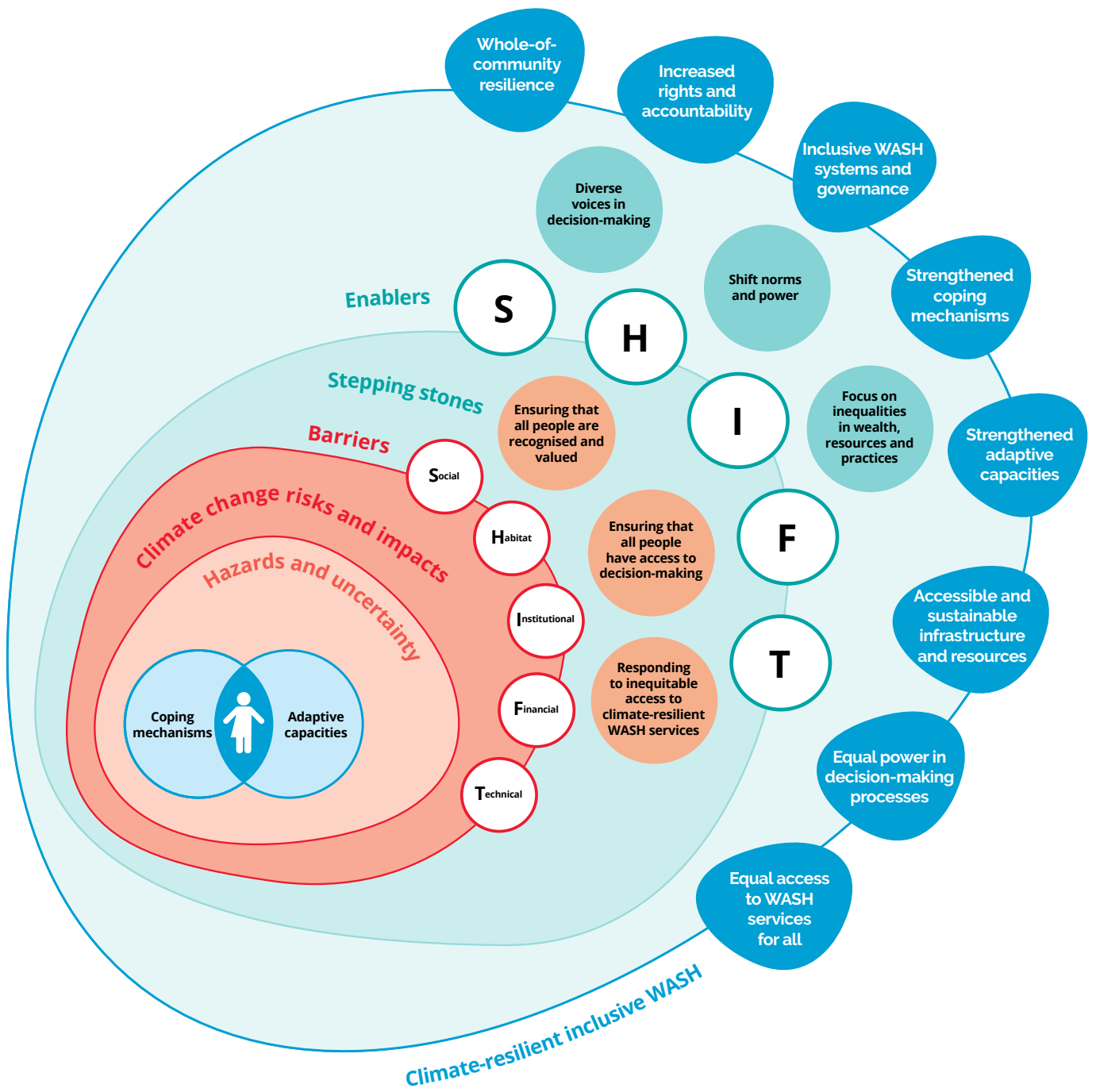
## Methods

This learning brief was informed by an external literature review and data collected by 14 WfW civil society organisation (CSO) project teams in nine countries in the Asia–Pacific region. The literature review looked at research (2019–23) on water, WASH, GEDSI and climate in the countries in South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Pacific where WfW projects have been implemented. The literature was analysed for the following aspects: barriers and enablers to the integration of GEDSI principles into climate-resilient WASH, approaches to doing so, and the characteristics of the populations involved.

In addition to the literature review, [WfW project](#) teams from Timor-Leste, Cambodia, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Pakistan, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Bangladesh provided written inputs, based on their in-country data collection. Methods included:

- Civil society organisation staff reflection meetings to share their learning, experiences, challenges and best practices in integrating GEDSI principles into their climate-resilient WASH work
- Focus group discussions with key CSO project stakeholders (for example, with rights holder organisations (RHOs)) to gather feedback on the project intervention and its impacts on groups and intersections
- Key informant interviews with government officials to gather in-depth insights on climate-resilient inclusive WASH.

The responses were assessed according to an analytical framework and validated in an online workshop with participating partners and learning group members (16 August 2024). This learning brief, particularly the key insights, were refined using partner feedback collected at the WfW Final Fund Event in October 2024.



**Figure 1.** Transition towards transformation for community resilience and climate-resilient inclusive WASH

## Linkages between GEDSI, WASH and climate resilience

- **GEDSI transformation requires that we consider the inherent linkages between climate change, WASH, resilience, equity and inclusion** – particularly for marginalised populations who experience intersectional disadvantages.
- The most marginalised people in communities are at the frontline of climate change hazards, uncertainty and impacts. Therefore, they need to be part of decision-making processes for context-appropriate and sustainable climate resilience solutions.

*Structurally disadvantaged people, who are subject to social, economic and political inequalities resulting historically from discrimination, marginality or disenfranchisement because of gender, age, ethnicity, class, language, ability and/or sexual orientation, are disproportionately vulnerable to the negative impacts of climate change hazards.*

H.O. Pörtner et al.<sup>2</sup>

The literature review and in-country data collection provided insights into understanding the inherent linkages between GEDSI, WASH and climate resilience, enabling some of the key messages for this brief to respond to questions of 'why' and 'how'. The evidence indicates that simultaneously reducing inequalities and building more resilient and inclusive WASH services creates a triple dividend—greater equity, more resilience and better access to improved WASH. Further, improving people's coping mechanisms (responding to climate events as they happen) and adaptive capacities (preparing for climate events or reducing their impact), facilitates a learning response to change, and can support people currently experiencing structural disadvantage to make long-term changes in the face of climate change.

It was found that people living in geographically precarious areas are exposed to climate hazards, uncertainty and impacts more often, to a greater degree, and/or for a longer duration than others. Furthermore, people with poor access to resources, information and decision-making are more seriously affected when exposed to climate hazards. In the face of climate change, those affected by intersecting forms of vulnerability have scant capacity to maintain or improve their WASH access. This is further compounded by intersectional identities (for example, women with disabilities). [Table 1](#) summarises climate change impacts as reported by population groups that reported their felt experience of climate change impacts from the in-country data collected within WFW project locations.

**Table 1. Impact of climate change reported by population groups within WfW projects**

Population groups	Climate change impact reported
<b>People with low income</b>	Reduces ability to earn an income, reach the market, rebuild and repair
<b>Women</b>	Increases caregiving, workloads (such as water carrying), and mental and physical exhaustion due to family and household responsibilities; reduces income-earning opportunities; exacerbates poor menstrual health and gender-based violence (GBV)
<b>People with disabilities</b>	Reduces access to services and information, increases reliance on caregivers and other community members, constrains income-earning opportunities
<b>Older people</b>	Reduces access to WASH services and increases reliance on caregiving
<b>Youth</b>	Reduces school attendance and increases susceptibility to diseases during floods, droughts and heatwaves
<b>Indigenous groups / those living in remote areas</b>	Creates prohibitive costs related to WASH services and reduces options for receiving climate warning information. Living in small island states, coastal regions or landlocked mountainous countries can increase vulnerabilities
<b>People with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics</b>	Exacerbates bullying, discrimination and violence
<b>People who are illiterate</b>	Jeopardises access to weather warning information
<b>Sanitary workers</b>	Increases occupational hazards from compromised sewage and sanitation systems and the precariousness of their employment status
<b>People who are not aligned to dominant political parties, non-locals, and people from ethnic and religious minority groups</b>	Reduces recognition and value, limits access to decision-making
<b>Households with family members who are migrants</b>	Affects WASH-related decision-making as men move away for work

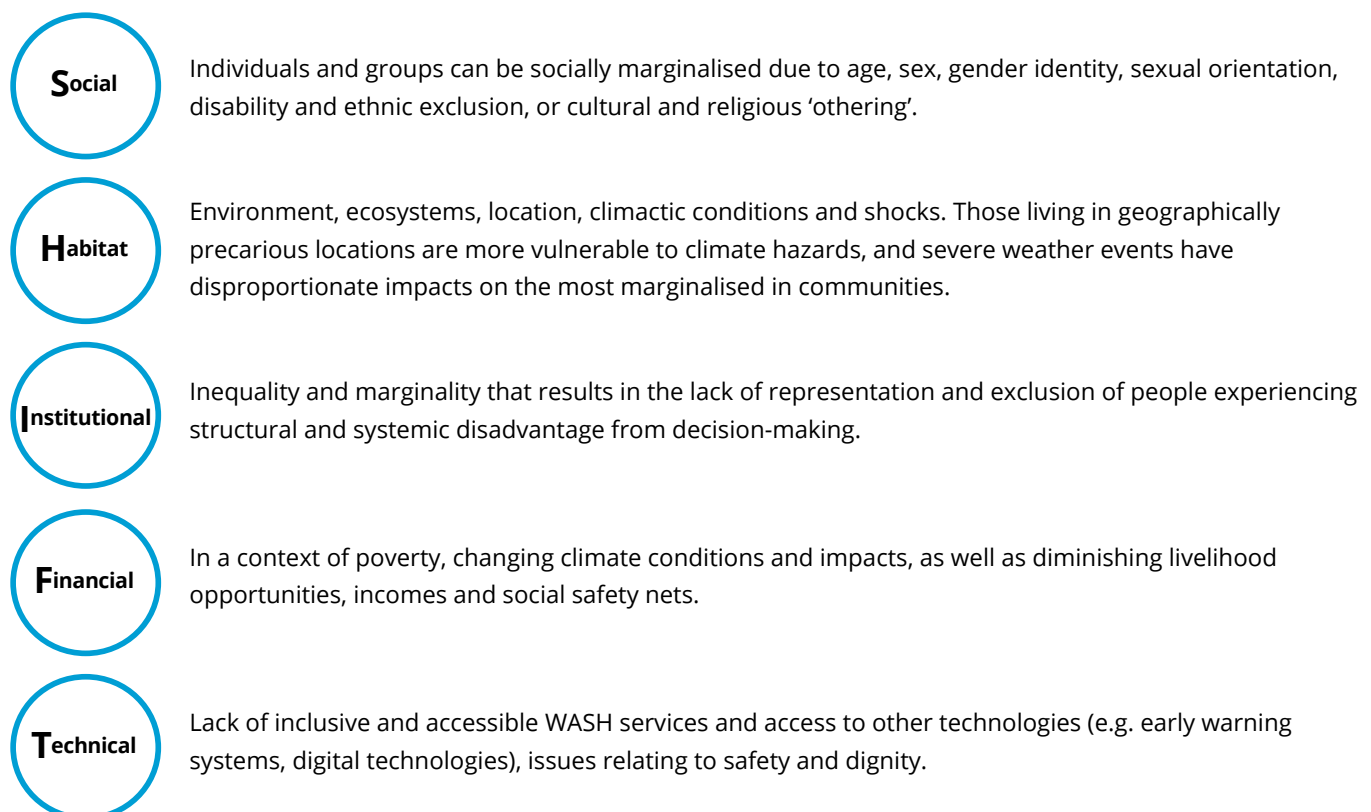
[Table 1](#) demonstrates that marginalised groups are at risk of falling even further behind in claiming their rights to WASH in the face of climate hazards. If they are not part of decision-making on climate solutions, they are likely to experience further uncertainty and adverse impacts. **More inclusive decision-making means that everyone benefits**, not just those considered ‘vulnerable’, as illustrated in [Figure 1](#).



# Barriers and enablers to climate-resilient WASH services – access and decision-making

- **Barriers – social, habitat, institutional, financial and technical – are varied and compounded** particularly for those with least access to climate-resilient inclusive WASH services.
- **Climate risk-informed and inclusive approaches built into WASH services and systems are key enablers** for effective community and climate resilience outcomes.
- **Enablers – social, habitat, institutional, financial and technical – of climate-resilient inclusive WASH:**
  - focus on inequalities in wealth, resources and practices
  - ensure diverse voices are represented in decision-making
  - shift norms and power.

Barriers to decision-making, access and use of climate-resilient inclusive WASH services need to be addressed to **shift** to a more enabling environment in each of the following dimensions:



Viewed from left to right, [Figure 1](#) shows that community members, including those most marginalised, possess inherent coping mechanisms and adaptive capacities due to their lived experience. However, due to social and gender inequalities, certain barriers can limit their access and decision-making capacity and exacerbate their vulnerabilities to the risks and impacts of climate change.

Adaptive capacities, coping mechanisms and resilience can be strengthened for everyone in the community when these inequalities are proactively reduced through the intentional implementation of the stepping stones ([Figure 1](#)). Inclusive WASH interventions allow a transformative shift from barriers to enablers to occur.

Access to WASH is fundamentally a rights issue, based on relationships of power and accountability. Climate change is accelerating the impacts of pre-existing patterns of discrimination and unjust decision-making as well as creating new inequalities. Without intentional investments to reduce WASH-related and broader inequalities, climate change escalates, exacerbates or entrenches underlying structural disadvantages.

### Barriers

Water for Women project teams reported that actual or perceived violence connected to climate change occurs in project settings. This can include violence towards people who lack food and steal from neighbours' gardens (World Vision PNG), domestic violence (iDE Cambodia), and women's and transgender peoples' increased fear of violence (Centre for Advocacy and Research (CFAR), India). Exclusion in community decision-making and lack of access to information were common barriers across projects. Many projects reported that people from minority groups felt ignored at events and excluded from decision-making and development of solutions for managing climate change impacts. For example, because women are generally not perceived as the primary breadwinners in Cambodia, they are excluded from decision-making and from developing solutions for managing climate change (iDE Cambodia). RHOs can also be excluded from climate resilience and WASH processes, which has the effect of blocking access to and control over technologies and information. Projects reported that society at large underestimates the abilities and contributions of people with disabilities. Emergency-related information and warnings are often inaccessible to older people or people with disabilities.

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*'What can a disabled woman do?' – is the mindset which families and communities live with. We are excluded from all decision-making processes.*

Community-Based Organisation (CBO) President, Ward 18, Patel Nagar via CFAR

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### Enablers

The learning group identified several examples of how WfW projects are shifting social barriers into enablers of climate-resilient inclusive WASH. This is being done by (for example) promoting the redistribution of care work within the household, supporting the integration of GBV pathways in climate-resilient WASH plans, and resolving water-related conflicts.

Projects have used campaigns to improve attitudes towards people with disabilities and provided useful examples of inclusion of people with disabilities in the WASH workforce. In some examples, citizen pressure forced the WASH interests of marginalised groups onto the political agenda and advanced rights and GEDSI for more transformative climate-resilient WASH. Partners' activities have also increased people's willingness to develop their own capacities to adapt to climate change, while supporting more equal decision-making about climate-resilient inclusive WASH.

People's traditional or religious beliefs influence how they perceive and respond to the threat of climate change. Traditional ecological knowledge can be a useful contributor to climate change adaptation. However, the short-term nature of many projects means the wisdom of customary institutions and Indigenous knowledges and languages can be missed if not considered from day one.<sup>3</sup> The in-country data collected from WfW WASH projects revealed that projects have been explicitly bringing in Indigenous and local knowledges through community dialogue processes and inclusive community-level committees, increasing their influence on decision-making.

# Habitat

Due to pre-existing global inequalities, climate-related stresses are being felt more harshly and adversely by people in Global South habitats and harming their ecosystems. Intra-community inequalities, as well as intra-household inequalities, deepen the climate's impact on certain people and groups, reducing their access to resources. Investments that support communities' capabilities in climate risk assessment and problem solving using whole-of-community approaches strengthens coping mechanisms and adaptive capacities both at individual and community levels.

## Barriers

Habitat barriers can vary for individuals and communities depending on their physical location and the extent to which they are affected by compounding inequalities. Climate change can reduce access to WASH in gradual ways – such as increasing average temperatures, variation in rainfall in wet and dry seasons, and sea-level rise – and suddenly, after climate-related shocks such as cyclones, floods and heatwaves. Examples of habitat barriers to WASH include increased water scarcity, and difficulty in rebuilding damaged facilities or purchasing new equipment after climate events, particularly for those living in remote areas, whose access to markets may become cut off.<sup>4</sup> Climate change events can also displace people, which makes meeting WASH needs more difficult.

## Enablers

In-country data showed that many WfW WASH projects have been building local capacities, particularly in communities, to assess the actual and expected impacts of climate hazards on WASH. Data collection is also enabling management actions to protect the quality and quantity of water resources needed for continuity of WASH service delivery (such as nature-based solutions, recycling or re-use). Examples from WfW WASH projects that have lowered habitat barriers include showing communities in Indonesia how to adapt water use patterns to their needs so they can maintain supply during droughts (Yayasan Plan International Indonesia (Plan Indonesia)). Also in Indonesia, assistive devices such as wheelchairs and walking sticks and proper pathways have improved access to community meetings and the project's climate and WASH meetings. In Nepal, during a recent drought, a rural municipality provided drinking water to people with disabilities, pregnant women, and postpartum women. Storage tanks were placed near their homes for easier access, and water filters and bottles were distributed (SNV Nepal). WfW research projects have also reviewed climate change impacts at basin and local scales and links to WASH service delivery.<sup>5</sup> This evidence-based research has helped projects to strengthening WASH access despite increasing seasonal and climate-related variation in water availability and quality.

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*People with disabilities are also required to drink a lot of water during extreme heat to protect themselves from heat-related health issues. But the question is where will they get this water, is safe and clean water available to them in sufficient amounts? And also, if they drink more water, they may need to urinate more ... Are the accessible WASH facilities available to them to manage this? They may not drink enough water, even in extreme heat – to limit their urination.*

Senior Research Assistant,  
Environmental Health and WASH  
Research Group, International  
Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease  
Research, Bangladesh (icddr,b)

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# Institutional

Vulnerability is shaped by the social structures and institutions that determine households' and communities' access to entitlements, including WASH, and affect people's resilience and their WASH actions.<sup>6</sup> 'Structures of constraint' are reinforced in the formal workplace, state and political institutions, as well as within the institutions of family and community.<sup>7</sup>

## Barriers

The learning group identified lack of climate data and knowledge as a key institutional barrier. In some cases, WfW WASH projects reported that governments and authorities lack both climate data and information about excluded groups. At the same time, without access to data and being represented in data, it is difficult for people experiencing structural disadvantage to have a political voice, to participate meaningfully in decision-making, receive information and acquire knowledge.

For example, in Bhutan, decision-making bodies such as local government disaster management committees (comprised of elected local government officials, health personnel, agriculture bureaucrats) lack diversity and often fail to include perspectives of women, persons with disabilities, single-headed households, and the poor (SNV Bhutan). In Pakistan, discriminatory laws and practices and denial of autonomy and legal capacity are institutional barriers that reduce representation and leadership of women and marginalised groups in climate-resilient inclusive WASH processes and climate policies, strategies and projects. Men hold leadership and decision-making positions in traditional jirgas and other communal meetings, including those about WASH (IRC Pakistan). Due to unequal power dynamics, adolescent girls' and women's voices and perspectives are often invisible within climate strategies.<sup>8</sup>

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*Whatever important decision is taken by the community leaders and stakeholders, whether it is related to water or something else, people like us who are disabled or belong to the diverse genders or are old, are not consulted and made part of the decision-making process, which is why our problems never get highlighted or addressed.*

A person with disabilities  
via Plan Indonesia

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## Enablers

Systems strengthening has been a crucial pathway for WfW WASH projects. WfW projects have:

- built institutional capacity to support climate-resilient inclusive WASH service delivery
- supported inclusion of GEDSI-based analysis in climate-resilient WASH policies and national plans
- engaged RHOs in climate-resilient WASH processes
- supported women's leadership in WASH services and systems.

IRC Pakistan has established women-led [Inclusive WASH Jirgas](#) (committees), alongside men's WASH Jirgas, to facilitate opportunities for more equal and inclusive WASH decision-making at community level. WfW WASH projects also provided examples of improved coordination between WASH-related agencies and other agencies and sectors (for example, in climate change/meteorology, water resource management, disaster risk management, and social development).

The in-country data uncovered some specific examples of how WfW WASH projects have shifted systems capacity from being a barrier to an enabler. In Cambodia, advocacy with local government stakeholders maintained a focus on inclusion in climate resilience strategy, creating opportunities for women and people experiencing structural disadvantage to attend climate-resilience discussions and linking people with disabilities networks with local authorities (iDE Cambodia).

In PNG, WfW WASH projects that strengthened the organisational and personnel capacity of RHOs and local governments helped them to take ownership of initiatives to empower women's and marginalised groups to contribute to influencing decision-making at all levels. Women and people with disabilities are now taking part in decision-making and taking up roles in communities, WASH committees or hamlet committees. Moreover, women can now share their opinions in forums such as the Committee of Village Civil Protection. At the sub-national level, RHOs advocate for women's issues in relation to WASH (Plan International and Live & Learn Environmental Education (LLEE) PNG, WaterAid PNG, World Vision PNG).

Water for Women WASH project data also highlighted that one key enabler can 'unlock' further steps that need to be supported to effectively shift a barrier. For example, in Nepal, the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) and SNV reflected on the constitutional provision of a 33% quota for women in committees to create opportunities for greater awareness and participation. Although this quota has been a helpful enabler, the extent to which women influence decision-making remains debatable, because they are largely surrounded by male bureaucrats and social norms restrict women from speaking in front of male seniors. Moreover, informal groups and committees often fail to comply with the quota, reducing women's opportunities for involvement in community decision-making.



Since joining an Inclusive WASH Jirga, (IWJ) in a neighbouring village, Saira, who lives with a disability, has participated in awareness sessions on hygiene, women's rights, and the 3Rs (reduce, re-use, recycle). She is involved in decision-making and advocating for her community's needs and makes craft from recycled materials that she plans to start selling. Women-led IWJs have been catalysts for transformative change. Their influence has inspired women from neighbouring villages to join forces, and in some cases, even establish their own IWJs, perpetuating a wave of empowerment  
Credit: IRC Pakistan

## Financial

Climate change affects all facets of life, not least people's earning capacity and livelihoods. This has significant implications for WASH services and can make new demands on already meagre incomes.

### Barriers

The WfW WASH project in-country data includes numerous financial barriers. During extreme weather events in PNG, many women and people with disabilities are prevented from trading, which results in loss of income and increases poverty. Many households with family members with disabilities cannot afford raised climate-resilient toilets, so during flooding caused by high tides, they are forced to defecate in buckets or in the open environment (World Vision PNG). In Timor-Leste, people with disabilities reported that extreme rainfall damages their crops and hampers their access to markets, reducing their income (WaterAid Timor-Leste). In Bangladesh, vulnerable households are faced with the prospect of spending their earnings on building and/or repairing WASH facilities, knowing that they live in climate hazard areas and hence infrastructure is vulnerable to floods and cyclones (icddr,b). If climate-related disasters are increasingly more frequent and intense, repeatedly repairing damaged WASH facilities can be very costly. Further, communities may not be eligible to receive disaster recovery funds to repair WASH facilities damaged by a climate hazard.

### Enablers

Financial enablers also featured in the WfW WASH projects. Climate subsidies were used to support poor households to improve their WASH situation (IDE Cambodia, Thrive Networks / East Meets West (Thrive/EMW) Cambodia), financial literacy training was provided to people with disabilities to support money management (Plan PNG), and economically disadvantaged groups were given help to obtain ID cards and support from government welfare systems (SNV Nepal, CFAR). In Timor-Leste, water supplies for use in home or kitchen gardens were improved so that women could earn income to support their families (WaterAid Timor-Leste). WaterAid also worked at both national and sub-national levels to support development and implementation of inclusive climate-resilient WASH policies, strategies and governance mechanisms to attract longer-term sustainable financing for project communities. These examples helped to secure financing for climate-resilient WASH infrastructure with inclusive features.



Since clean water connections were installed in their village in Tboung Khmum province, Cambodia, families like Ms Chin Leng's are no longer forced to rely on unsafe and climate-vulnerable well and rainwater sources, with access to an affordable piped supply  
Credit: Thrive/EMW / Thi Tran

# Technical

Improving the technical design of WASH technologies and services is often an entry point and pragmatic way to respond to climate change.

## Barriers

Technical barriers can include costs, replicability, standardisation, complexities of technologies, sustainability, and locally lived realities such as settings with poor access to markets and supply chains. Increasing the cost and complexity of technology, such as by fully subsidising climate-resilient toilets and water systems in communities without any mechanisms to create sustained demand, can mean systems become defunct and community members may revert to poor WASH practices. Projects that install community-level solar powered water pumps must carefully consider their operation and maintenance requirements, such as replacement parts, tools, costs, roles and know-how, beyond the project's timeframe. Moreover, taking one-size-fits-all or 'externally applied' approaches to climate-resilient services can exacerbate pre-existing inequalities of wealth, health and opportunity. Finally, women's lack of access to digital technologies creates disadvantage and can worsen disparities or increase their dependency on men.<sup>9</sup>

## Enablers

In WfW WASH projects, a key technical enabler for improved WASH access was the focus on infrastructure accessibility. This was manifested in a human-centred design approach, combining innovation and existing technology to meet the needs of diverse user groups. Many projects reported the increased observance and promotion of [universal design principles](#) when working with project stakeholders (government and private sector). Furthermore, the principles of co-design have been embedded in many project activities, which included engaging with RHOs (disability, women's, sexual and gender minorities) to strengthen policies and processes for accessible WASH, and local people's involvement in consultations about infrastructure design with contractors, masons and other construction stakeholders. The operation and maintenance of sustainable WASH technologies is recognised as a key consideration for managing climate risk. Some projects mainstreamed a GEDSI approach into their technical training activities by supporting a quota of local female technicians to repair damage to water systems (WaterAid Timor-Leste).

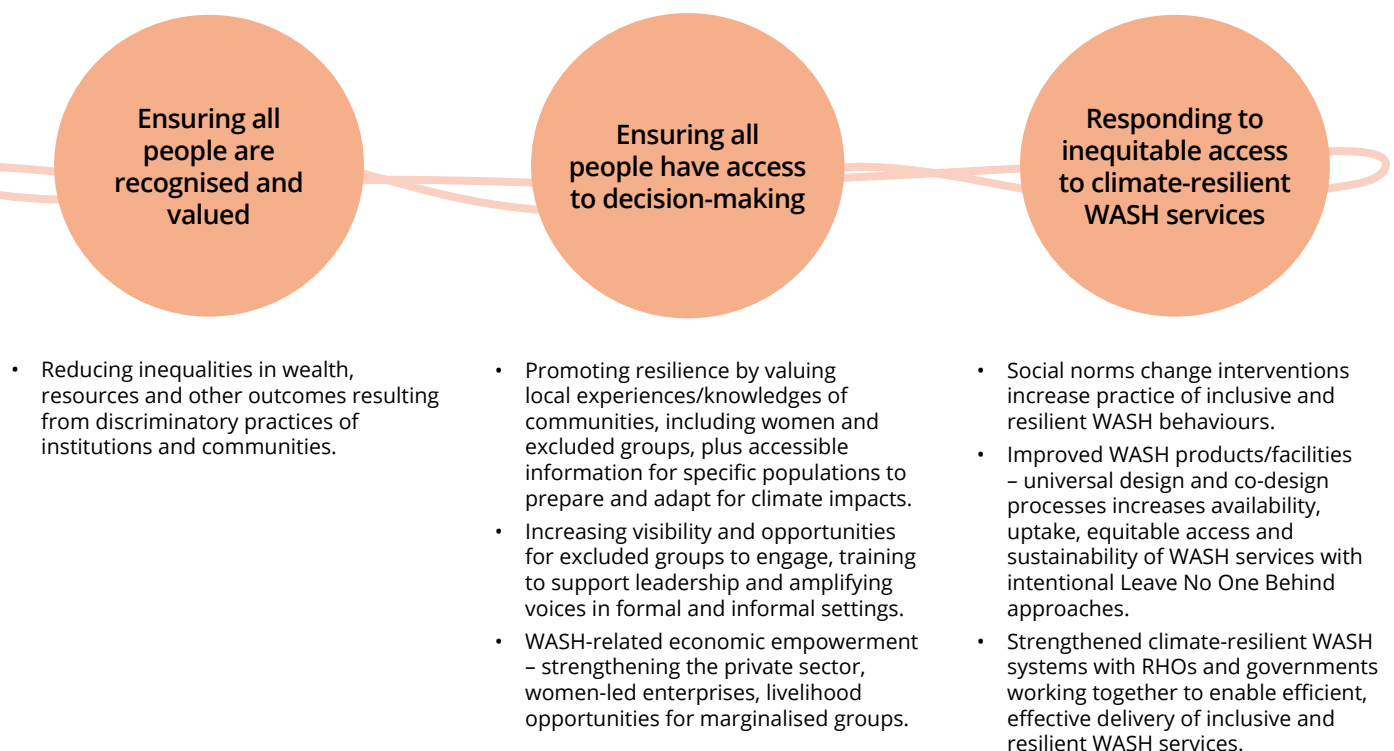


Women undertake operation and maintenance works on a piped water system in Liquiçã, Timor-Leste  
Credit: WaterAid Timor-Leste

## Stepping stones to SHIFT barriers to enablers

- **Inclusive and accessible WASH approaches benefit everybody**, increasing coping mechanisms and adaptive capacities. This has a multiplier effect, creating greater equality, health, livelihood, food security and education outcomes, as well as wider poverty reduction and planetary health.
- Climate resilience is unachievable without community resilience.
- Climate resilience and community resilience embody:
  - whole-of-community resilience
  - inclusive WASH systems and governance
  - accessible and sustainable infrastructure and resources
  - access to WASH services for all
  - increased rights and accountability
  - equitable power in decision-making.

Incremental steps and pathways are required to **shift** barriers to enablers of community resilience and climate-resilient inclusive WASH. Three stepping stones (shown in [Figure 1](#)) must be traversed in order to dismantle barriers and shift to enablers. [Figure 2](#) summarises the three stepping stones (ideally, carried out consecutively).



**Figure 2.** Stepping stones to SHIFT barriers to enablers



At first sight, these stepping stones may not appear to differ between programming for 'inclusive WASH' and 'climate-resilient inclusive WASH' projects. The WfW WASH project in-country data reflected the inherent link between community and climate resilience, and that a certain level of GEDSI action is necessary to overcome existing barriers and norms, which in turn strengthens community resilience. As the resilience of a community grows, so too do the coping mechanisms and adaptive capacities of individuals within it. Marginalised groups within a community require more targeted support to overcome their disadvantage. Programs require a locally led approach that embeds Indigenous and local knowledges, while taking the community power dynamics of these knowledges into account. In this way, climate-resilient inclusive WASH services can be a key lever of wider transformative social change towards equity and climate resilience.

Each stepping stone is explained in more detail below, together with SHIFT snapshots from WfW projects that have taken these incremental steps. In line with a strengths-based approach, these practices build on people's resources and knowledges, their aspirations, capabilities and visions, as well as their ability to change their lives and those of others. The stepping stones show how actors have supported the transfer of power and progress towards climate-resilient inclusive WASH services and systems within the WfW WASH projects, and by doing so, overcame some key barriers. Taking these stepping stones towards transformation requires advancing rights to WASH and increasing diversity of voices and participation to more effectively meet the complex and interrelated challenges of climate change.



Members of a water user committee in Sarlahi Rural Municipality, Nepal, discuss the construction of a water supply system  
Credit: SNV / Madan Bahadur Bhandari

# Stepping stone 1: Ensuring all people are recognised and valued

This stepping stone refers to recognition and value at various levels within society. At the household level, recognition often starts in the family. Social norms change can challenge perceptions about who should participate in decision-making bodies, as well as raise awareness about the rights and capabilities of different groups. At the community level, inclusive processes for actively involving diverse people are instrumental in transforming norms. Understanding human rights and mechanisms for holding the government accountable for providing climate-resilient inclusive WASH services is critical.

## SHIFT snapshot 1: Diversity in action in Indonesia

**WfW partner:** Plan Indonesia

**Location:** Nusa Tenggara Timur, Indonesia

Through a dedicated and intentional focus on GEDSI throughout their [WfW WASH projects](#), Plan Indonesia and local partners supported transformative changes for sustainable and inclusive WASH outcomes. Government and public awareness have increased around gender equality and social inclusion issues, with women and people with disabilities being given more space and opportunities to express opinions and make decisions both in the household and public events. Women have been appointed as heads of Rukun Tetangga (lowest administrative division of Indonesia), as heads of villages, and in leadership roles at sub-district and district levels. People with disabilities (men and women) have been invited to participate in musrenbangkab (district-level development planning forums). Bappeda, the development and planning agency, held musrenbang rumah kasih (inclusive public planning forum) and invited marginalised groups to participate in producing planning documents. A disability musrenbang was established and is chaired by a woman and involving people with disabilities.

## SHIFT snapshot 2: Realising rights in India

**WfW partner:** CFAR

**Locations:** Bhubaneswar and Jaipur, India

In India, CFAR's ongoing advocacy for the legal recognition of the rights of transgender persons and older persons and support of protections against discrimination have fostered stronger understanding and acceptance in their communities and in institutions. In turn, this has opened new and improved livelihood opportunities in sanitation services for some of the most marginalised in the settlements (such as transgender people and women from diverse castes), which subsequently benefit the whole community.

### SHIFT snapshot 3: Shifting stigma, empowering inclusion in PNG

**WfW partners:** Plan International and LLEE

**Location:** Autonomous Region of Bougainville, PNG

In PNG, Plan International and LLEE have supported positive social shifts that are empowering people with disabilities to participate in important community forums. As a result of rights training conducted with Bougainville Women's Federation, people with disabilities are becoming more confident in themselves. The training has also changed the mindsets of able-bodied service providers and leaders. People with disabilities are now more visible in town, active in the community, playing sport, and speaking openly about their rights. People with disabilities are talked about in a more positive way. Government departments and organisations are more supportive of people with disabilities, actively talking about issues relating to disability and including them in their work. More knowledge about the needs of people with disability means agencies can respond in the most effective way, including in a disaster.



An elderly man stands in front of his new inclusive and accessible latrine, built close to his home with support from Plan International and LLEE through WfW  
Credit: Plan International and LLEE PNG

## Stepping stone 2: Ensuring all people have access to decision-making

Inclusive WASH services depend on inclusive decision-making processes. Making WASH services more gender and socially inclusive raises the status of women and people experiencing structural disadvantage, enabling them to become leaders and decision-makers. Such efforts provide opportunities for them to have their voices heard and identify climate risks and solutions that affect diverse groups of people. Supporting the inclusion of multiple stakeholders (with diverse identities, voices, needs and capacities) in decision-making processes with contextually specific Do No Harm approaches has enabled the production and use of disparate forms of knowledge to improve WASH systems.

### SHIFT snapshot 4: Participatory WASH planning in PNG

**WfW partner:** WaterAid

**Location:** Wewak District, East Sepik Province, PNG

WaterAid has supported diverse community members to lead decision-making and identify their own inclusion and resilience outcomes and adaptation responses in WASH plans. This participatory approach, in turn, can provide a springboard into other forms of political action.<sup>10</sup> For instance, gathering whole households to inform them of the rights and needs of people with disabilities can underpin more transformative change.

### SHIFT snapshot 5: Empowering women's leadership in Pakistan

**WfW partner:** IRC

**Locations:** Peshawar, Swat and Buner, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, Pakistan

In Pakistan, awareness sessions and leadership training led by IRC increased the representation and participation of women, girls, and women with disabilities in community decision-making processes, such as broad-based community meetings and women-led Inclusive WASH Jirgas. A formal partnership was established with the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Commission on the Status of Women, leading to integration of women's needs in project activities, greater women's voice and participation in communal decision-making, and resolution of community conflicts. Additionally, a training workshop for the Social Welfare Department and organisations for people with disabilities ensured inclusive disaster risk reduction planning and management for people with disabilities. Four self-help groups were established for transgender individuals, who also received training in climate-resilient WASH practices.

## SHIFT snapshot 6: Building community cohesion in India

**WfW partner:** CFAR

**Locations:** Bhubaneswar and Jaipur, India

Within CFAR's project communities, a transformative shift saw women taking the lead in decision-making in community-led sanitation campaigns and advocating for water conservation, as well as asking the parshad (municipal council) for help to resolve problems related to drought. Further evidence of the transformation was apparent during a recent flood, when the community ensured that individuals with mobility difficulties were evacuated safely. Drawing upon their traditional knowledge and bolstered by strong community support systems, older community members shared their wisdom and guidance with younger generations. Participants involved in accessibility assessments reported that success in getting potholes filled has given them confidence that their voices matter in discussions. These changes are not just about empowerment – they are about building a community in which everyone feels included and valued.



A sanitary inspector with community members conducting a participatory resource assessment, supported through CFAR's WfW project [Building Climate-Resilient WASH for Climate-Impacted Vulnerable Populations](#)

Credit: CFAR archives 2024

## Stepping stone 3: Responding to inequitable access to climate-resilient WASH services

Improving marginalised communities' access to climate-resilient WASH services requires attention to how the services will be accessed and maintained. Most WfW WASH projects included Water Safety Plans, which incorporate climate change risk assessments to support individuals and communities to understand how climate change affects their services and to take action for mitigation or adaptation. Incorporating universal design principles ensures that WASH infrastructure and services meet the needs of current and future users.

### SHIFT snapshot 7: Inclusive committees increasing WASH accessibility in Indonesia

**WfW partner:** Plan Indonesia

**Location:** Indonesia

Community triggering on climate-resilient WASH can promote inclusion and access. For example, since a village in one of Plan Indonesia's project communities sponsored a climate-resilient WASH workshop, women, people with disabilities, and youth have been included in the village's community-led total sanitation team, waste management team, and in preparing action plans.

### SHIFT snapshot 8: Prioritising support to Leave No One Behind in Bhutan

**WfW partner:** SNV

**Location:** Bhutan

Following engagement with organisations of persons with disabilities working in partnership with SNV in Bhutan, a special disaster fund was established, coordinated by a local regional government office. The office collects disability disaggregated data, so that households with family members with disabilities can be prioritised for support in disaster situations. New WASH facilities include ramps and handrails to improve access to persons with disabilities, and features that meet the specific needs of women and girls, such as privacy, security and menstrual health resources.



A two-day self-help group review meeting held in Bumthang, Bhutan, provided opportunities for persons with disabilities and their caregivers to share challenges, issues, and opportunities to liaise with local government to strengthen service provision in collaboration with the Disabled People's Organization of Bhutan  
Credit: SNV Bhutan

## SHIFT snapshot 9: Enabling WASH access for everyone at all times

**WfW partners:** London School of hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), icddr,b and World Vision

**Locations:** Gaibandha and Satkhira districts, Bangladesh

Drawing on disability inclusive [research](#) undertaken by LSHTM and icddr,b, World Vision Bangladesh identified and implemented processes that supported the participation of people with disabilities in identifying climate-resilient solutions for community WASH infrastructure. A community living in a climate-vulnerable coastal area decided to raise tube well platforms to reduce cyclone or flood damage and saltwater contamination. Following consultation with people with disabilities, construction included brick and cement facilities and pathways to minimise flood damage and thus maintain WASH access for all.

## SHIFT snapshot 10: Safeguarding water and sanitation in Siem Reap

**WfW partner:** iDE

**Location:** Siem Reap, Cambodia

To reach vulnerable people and groups in climate-impacted communes, iDE designed a household engagement strategy to share important information about using water filters, and ran behaviour change campaigns in communities to promote climate-resilient knowledge. iDE designed accessible sanitation products for climate vulnerability, such as the Sky Latrine and 'sanitation in challenging environment' products. iDE operates a payment plan that provides subsidies to people with government issued 'ID poor' cards and enables poor people without ID poor cards to install or upgrade latrines. iDE's 'pro-poor' approach has ensured that low-income communities are able to participate in local WASH markets in meaningful and sustainable ways.



Through door-to-door behaviour change messaging, iDE sales agents promote affordable, aspirational and climate-resilient latrines to rural households in seasonally flooded areas such as the Lake Tonle Sap region  
Credit: iDE / Tet Chann

# Implications for the WASH sector and beyond

**Drawing on the findings from literature and the in-country data, we have learnt that to achieve climate-resilient inclusive WASH, we must make more concerted efforts to:**

- Put the knowledge and voices of people at the frontline of climate change at the centre of decision-making processes.
- Address the many barriers to more equitable decision-making about climate change and access to WASH services. This will benefit everybody, particularly the most marginalised. This should be done using targeted investments, data, resourcing and strategies focused explicitly on equality and inclusion.
- Incorporate inclusion and GEDSI transformative approaches from the outset in the design, implementation and monitoring of projects for climate-resilient WASH.

**Key considerations for WASH and climate change actors seeking to progress these efforts are outlined below.**

## **GEDSI cannot be an add-on to climate-resilient WASH — it should be the starting point of program design**

Climate-resilient inclusive WASH programs require activities that reframe access to services and participation in decision-making as issues of equity, data, inclusion and justice, and take an intersectional approach to improving them. Although menstrual health and GBV were mentioned relatively infrequently in the in-country partner data, other evidence indicates that these are important areas of focus if we want to holistically reduce gendered barriers to women's meaningful participation in climate-resilient WASH decision-making.

## **Expanding the mindsets and skills of sector professionals and the remit of organisations can be transformative**

Silos within organisations shape how we prioritise GEDSI and climate in our work. For instance, individual WASH staff may not list climate, equity and inclusion among their many capacities and responsibilities. Moreover, climate and GEDSI specialists might not work together on the same projects. WASH, climate and GEDSI specialists require the skills and mindset for joined-up thinking and working. WASH professionals must be mindful of power dynamics and consider the social reasons why some people lack services, have less recognition or decision-making power, or are more affected by climate change. Further development of rights-based understandings and approaches to climate-resilient inclusive WASH services is imperative. Learning from organisations with a dual mandate for emergencies and development could help WASH actors become more familiar with good practices under disaster risk reduction or 'building back better' in order to apply them within development contexts.

## **Monitoring systems to track climate risks and impacts on WASH services must be strengthened**

Disaggregated data about both climate and program impacts on disadvantaged groups is needed.<sup>11</sup> This requires monitoring for unintended consequences of solutions (both social and environmental). For instance, enhanced climate resilience of faecal sludge treatment technologies could make the cost of emptying services widely unaffordable, putting marginalised people at greater risk of waterborne diseases. Agencies must consider the implications of climate resilience interventions by embedding Do No Harm principles in WASH services.



### **Making space for those most adversely impacted to contribute to solutions in WASH decision-making is integral**

People who have experienced marginalisation usually know what solutions will work for them, but need support to execute them. Working with diverse groups is a prerequisite to better understanding their vulnerability and resilience in the face of everyday climate risks to WASH services, which in turn improves the effectiveness and sustainability of these services.<sup>12</sup> Drawing from people's experiences can help in building local models, as well as designing actions to mitigate the causes and effects of vulnerabilities. This can begin with gender and power analysis, vulnerability assessments or coping mechanism surveys to understand interconnected social, technical and infrastructure factors that shape WASH systems.

### **Seeking and sharing data and knowledge has the potential to build resilience where it matters**

Participatory planning integrates knowledge from diverse sources, which is key to achieving the depth of learning required for transforming social norms.<sup>13</sup> Participatory technology and policy design, as well as accessibility and safety audits, avoid the pitfalls of exclusion within technical designs. Ongoing learning processes (including triple loop learning<sup>14</sup>) and adaptive management can inform the design, implementation and monitoring of climate-resilient inclusive WASH services. WASH agencies can also increase the accessibility and dissemination of user-friendly research findings and information about climate risks to communities by presenting the findings of their own research to participants and increasing their awareness of wider climate science. Moreover, respectfully questioning existing practices and underlying societal norms and values supports broader transformations by underscoring the importance of power relations, which in turn highlights social justice and aims for fundamental change.

### **Collaborating in meaningful partnerships and networks is key to transformation**

Collaboration is needed to support people's and RHOs' struggles for rights, inclusion, dignity and access to WASH services. This can occur via politicisation of their concerns, overcoming social divisions for collective action, and questioning entrenched beliefs or norms that are harmful and exclusionary. Key to participation in decision-making is equipping RHOs with the necessary skills, information, space and credibility. It is critical that sufficient time, materials and resources are allocated from the outset of programs to enable full empowerment of RHOs. Moreover, RHOs must be supported to develop a more comprehensive understanding of climate-resilient inclusive WASH services and behaviours, and climate change specialists encouraged to strengthen their understanding of how to incorporate GEDSI in their work. Activities may also encourage policymakers and other actors in the WASH system to embrace a more rights and participatory-based approach and catalyse collaboration between agencies to amplify complementary strengths and efforts.

In these ways, WASH services can contribute to progress towards a more equitable society in which the underlying drivers of marginalisation and vulnerability are weakened. The role of the professionals then becomes less about being a fixer of problems and more about being a co-facilitator of responses to climate impacts.<sup>15</sup>

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***When we don't speak as a collective no one listens to us. We have to form forums to put forth our rights.***

CBO President via CFAR

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# Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Water for Women, *Learning Agenda*, WfW, Melbourne, 2023. <https://www.waterforwomenfund.org/en/learning-and-resources/learning-agenda.aspx>
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- <sup>11</sup> Water for Women, *Knowledge and Practice Gaps in Climate Resilient Inclusive WASH*.
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- <sup>13</sup> Mcmillan et al., 'Rights, justice and climate resilience: lessons from fieldwork in urban Southeast Asia.'
- <sup>14</sup> Single loop learning refers to what we do and how we do it (behaviour). Double loop learning focuses on the rationale for what and how we do (thinking), and triple loop learning refers to changing what is possible to do and how to do it (perceptions).
- <sup>15</sup> Pacific Disability Forum, *Submission to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: disability inclusion in DRR in the Pacific*, Pacific Disability Forum, 2023. <https://www.undrr.org/publication/thematic-report-disability-inclusion-pacific>



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Water for Women supports improved health, gender equality and well-being in Asian and Pacific communities through climate-resilient and socially inclusive WASH projects and research. It is the Australian Government's flagship WASH program, investing AUD159.9 million over seven years. Water for Women partnered with civil society organisations, research organisations and local partners to deliver 40 projects in 16 countries from 2018 to 2024. Knowledge and learning are central to Water for Women, positioning the Fund as an important contributor to global knowledge development and sharing in climate-resilient, inclusive WASH. Water for Women's [Learning Agenda](#) promotes collaborative learning, knowledge development and sharing to support long-term transformative change to WASH policy and practice globally.

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