LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND

Summary of Lessons from Water for Women
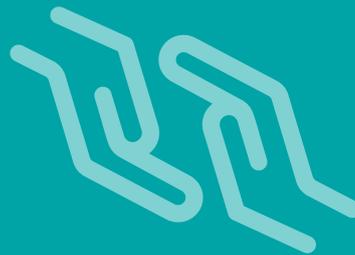
Key insights

A leave no one behind (LNOB) approach in water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) reduces marginalisation and exclusion by identifying and addressing intersecting forms of disadvantage and inequality. LNOB approaches aim to reach many marginalised people across large areas and through policy, and to transform beliefs, norms and values that contribute to discrimination and people being left behind. Water for Women civil society organisation (CSO) partners work in diverse ways to support the voices of women, girls, people with disabilities, people from sexual and gender minority communities and other marginalised groups. As part of a dedicated initiative under Water for Women's Learning Agenda, insights on LNOB approaches from CSO-implemented projects are captured in a detailed report and summarised here.

Contents

Lessons learnt

There is a depth of experience in LNOB approaches across Water for Women CSO-implemented projects[1] and a richness that is difficult to capture. That said, key lessons learnt include:

Raising disadvantaged voices can compel power structures to listen and act, contributing to broader WASH systems strengthening

The multiple ways that CSOs work to support the voices of women, girls, people with disabilities and other marginalised groups, and ensure their participation in WASH decision-making bodies, mean that their messages and voices cannot be ignored.

Supporting leadership for LNOB initiatives across multiple levels and organisations helps shift norms, scale deep and embed equitable approaches

Supporting leadership development was the most common LNOB approach that CSOs employed. CSOs have been creative in thinking about how leadership skills for LNOB could be developed, and in building leadership skills within rights holder organisations (RHOs), CSOs themselves and duty bearers at multiple levels of government.

There are limitations to what WASH initiatives can achieve in the face of overwhelming disadvantage

While some CSOs have started to address economic and other forms of disadvantage, others believe that WASH projects alone cannot address systemic LNOB issues. However, they can and do find ways to overcome aspects of systemic disadvantage by identifying and eliminating barriers to WASH access.

In this study, few CSOs described how they manage and address trade-offs resulting from LNOB efforts. For example, identifying and working with different groups may rely on targeted approaches but should not become overly complicated or burdensome to administer. Similarly, many CSOs characterised their efforts as successful, but the extent to which perceptions of success rely on evaluation and measurement is unclear.

Partnerships with RHOs and coordination across stakeholders supports the co-creation of LNOB solutions

Numerous CSOs highlighted the LNOB benefits gained through partnering with RHOs. Such formal and informal partnerships can build mutual understanding of imbalances in power and privilege. CSOs working with RHOs are jointly assessing exclusion and marginalisation, as well as co-creating solutions to overcome them.

Do No Harm strategies guard against unintended consequences

Any WASH or other program can have negative consequences, particularly for marginalised people, who may inadvertently be exposed to increased stigmatisation or risk of gender-based or other targeted violence through project interventions. Without a purposive and well-resourced Do No Harm approach, a WASH project can unintentionally reinforce gender and social inequalities. For this reason, an intentional Do No Harm focus is essential for all WASH programming.

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[1] The report reflects analysis of 16 projects implemented by the Centre for Advocacy and Research India, iDE, the International Rescue Committee, Plan International, RTI International, SNV Netherlands Development Organisation, Thrive Networks/East Meets West, WaterAid and World Vision. Projects are four years into implementation across 15 countries. Lessons from, and syntheses of, CSO self-assessments on their LNOB approaches are based on an online survey completed in late 2021.

The LNOB challenge

Progressive realisation of WASH as a basic right requires effective mechanisms to support equity and inclusion and ensure access to WASH services that are acceptable, used and sustained over time. Various support mechanisms have been used globally over past decades, and approaches are increasingly becoming more nuanced in their application. In ensuring that we leave no one behind, all people who may be disadvantaged must be considered.

Reflecting their mandates, CSOs are often at the forefront of providing WASH services that reach the most marginalised in society, working towards the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG6), ensuring availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all. CSOs' work ranges from advocacy for the rights of marginalised people to provision of WASH services to those who lack them. Through their direct work with communities, local authorities and the private sector, CSOs have deep insights into the challenges disadvantaged groups face and the systemic changes required to overcome them.

Sanitation demand creation in progress in Malhaniya, Saptari, Nepal   Credit: SNV/Nico Hertweck

Framing LNOB for WASH

Leaving no one behind means identifying and considering multiple, intersecting forms of disadvantage and inequality and tackling their root causes. The approach aims to combat discrimination and rising inequality, including within and amongst countries. LNOB is connected to the rights-based principles of non-discrimination and equality, inclusion and participation, and accountability and transparency (UNICEF, 2021). These principles and values 'place the person and their inherent dignity at the heart of development efforts, empowering all people to become active partners in this endeavour' (UNSDG, 2022).

WASH practitioners, governments and donors increasingly recognise that a transformative approach – one that addresses power and privilege, and values belonging and participation – is needed to leave no one behind and realise the aspirations of SDG6.

Enormous disadvantage exists worldwide, including for individuals and groups who are marginalised, excluded or actively discriminated against, or are experiencing inequities, inequalities or stigma (De Albuquerque, 2014). We need to consider all people who may be disadvantaged, including people with disabilities, people marginalised by ethnicity, sexuality and gender identity (including women, girls, non-binary and trans people), poverty, religion, age or other factors. LNOB aims to understand how people may face multiple and compounding sources of disadvantage.

While many causes of disadvantage are self-evident, others are more hidden and difficult to identify. For instance, underlying political/economic contexts that perpetuate power and privilege imbalances, low institutional capacities and/or entrenched belief systems, can all contribute to exclusion, stigma and disadvantage.

Several frameworks can help WASH practitioners unpack multiple and compounding sources of marginalisation and discrimination that reduce WASH access. The United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) conceptualisation of LNOB identifies three 'mutually reinforcing levers' of **Examine**, **Empower** and **Enact** (Figure 1) (UNDP, 2018). 'Examine' refers to identifying 'who' is being, or at risk of being, left behind and why. In the context of LNOB, 'empower' means to enable the voice of disadvantaged people to be heard through meaningful participation. 'Enact' means to develop and accomplish inclusive strategies and approaches. LNOB approaches in many cases focus on shifting social norms and aim for transformative impact.

Figure 1. The three mutually reinforcing levers to ensure no-one is left behind   Adapted from UNDP (2018)

Examine

Who are CSOs working with?

Water for Women has an explicit objective to promote inclusive WASH, and all projects work directly with women and girls and people with disabilities. Projects also work with the elderly, people living in poverty, ethnic minorities, sexual and gender minorities, and remote populations. Figure 2 illustrates the groups identified by Water for Women CSO projects as at risk of being left behind in WASH.
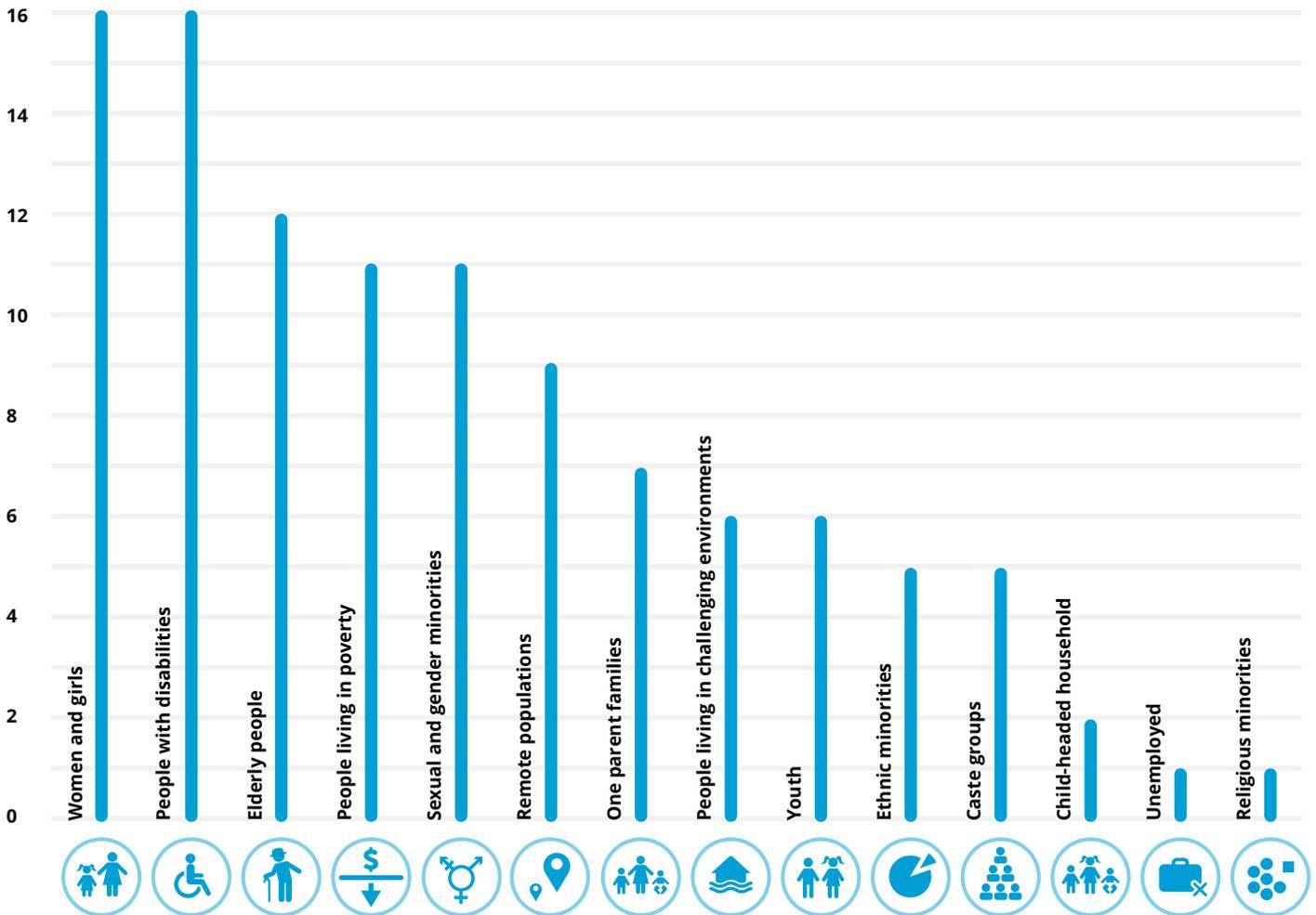

Figure 2. Groups identified as at risk of being left behind in WASH by CSO projects

Empower

Enabling voice and meaningful participation

Through Water for Women projects, CSOs used a multitude of mutually reinforcing 'software' and 'hardware' interventions to support women and girls, and other marginalised groups to strengthen their voice. These included, for example:

- capacity-building initiatives for individuals and organisations, such as leadership training, life skills training, menstrual health and hygiene sessions and business skills development

- removing barriers to the use of public spaces, including where WASH decision-making forums are held, using universal design principles and provision of assistive devices

- making reasonable adjustments to project activities (e.g., providing childcare, holding meetings when women can attend, providing materials in a range of formats to accommodate people with different disabilities and educational levels)

- meeting the WASH hardware needs of marginalised individuals through consulting with them on universal facility designs, ensuring those are accessible at meeting and public spaces, and provision of assistive devices.

Meeting the practical needs and strategic interests of women, girls, people with disabilities, transgender people and other marginalised groups in private and public spheres supports their access to WASH decision-making forums, where they can engage and speak for themselves in demanding their rights.

"We have learnt that to address the needs of people appropriately, they must be involved and their views heard on how they should be supported.
In other words, they must be at the centre of their own transformation rather than it being imposed on them."

WaterAid PNG

Community WASH project scoping at Walandoum, Papua New Guinea, as part of WaterAid's Water for Women project   Credit: WaterAid Wewak team

Enact

Inclusive, catalytic and accountable strategies

LNOB Approach	Examples of CSO activities
Mobilising, partnering with and supporting RHOs	• Most CSOs partner with organisations of persons with disabilities, women's rights organisations and sexual and gender minority groups. • CSOs have helped to establish, re-vitalise and ensure the sustainability of RHOs. • Benefits of partnerships with RHOs include two-way learning and links to referral services.
Fostering local leadership	• In RHOs: building the skills and confidence of individuals and organisations which has benefits for self-organising, participation in forums, increasing economic self-sufficiency. • Of women's committees: supporting participation of women and mainstreaming their concerns in decision-making processes at community levels. • Of government and duty-bearers: supporting engagement with and support for LNOB.
Inclusive technologies and infrastructure, and information and communication	• Overcoming physical barriers to WASH with universal design features – such as building new facilities or rehabilitating or upgrading existing facilities. • Developing and disseminating behaviour change communications and information education and communication materials (e.g., for menstrual health and hygiene) in tailored or accessible formats. • Providing assistive devices to improve living conditions and mobility for people with disabilities.
Building capacities	• Designing, tailoring, supporting and running capacity-building activities across a multitude of topics to build skills and knowledge in government, community and RHO partners. • Capacity-building focus ranges from life-skills to leadership skills targeting multiple organisations and organisational levels.
Targeted subsidies	• Providing time-bound and targeted sanitation subsidies to help poor and marginalised households invest in household latrines.
Economic empowerment through inclusive and pro-poor business models	• Improving the self-financing and economic independence of both organisations and individuals through income-generating activities. • Supporting vulnerable or marginalised individuals, such as through support to businesses led by women and/or people with disabilities.
Systems strengthening to incorporate inclusive WASH processes	Strengthening institutions to be more inclusive and encompassing of the needs of marginalised groups, through: • institutionalising government budget support for disability inclusion • supporting policy reviews and training in evidence-based advocacy • increasing representation of marginalised groups on WASH decision-making bodies • mobilising additional resources from government, family and other networks.
Do No Harm	• Ensuring the project is informed by a gender and social power analysis undertaken at inception. • Consulting with and amplifying the voices of people with lived experience. • Engaging with RHOs for gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) capacity-building of staff, partners and stakeholders and for advancing their rights agendas. • Engaging with men and boys to support empowerment initiatives of women, girls and the marginalised. • Engaging with WASH duty-bearers on GEDSI issues in WASH, and supporting their direct engagement with RHOs on GEDSI and WASH issues.

Influencing LNOB approaches at scale

CSOs have worked to reduce marginalisation and exclusion in WASH beyond their project's geographic and temporal boundaries and make impact at scale. The three main forms of scaling of approaches are 'scaling out', 'scaling up' and 'scaling deep' (Figure 3). Reaching greater numbers of people with a similar approach – scaling out – is a common ambition for projects. Many of Water for Women's CSO partners worked to scale up, influencing government policies, institutions, laws and data collection. Though not widely recognised in the WASH sector, CSOs that work to influence leaders and shift norms and the status quo are also starting to scale deep – trying to shift deeply entrenched norms that marginalise certain groups in society to ensure no one is left behind.

Scale Up:
"Impacting laws and policy"
Changing institutions at the level of policy, rules and laws

Scale Out:
"Impacting greater numbers"
Replication and dissemination, increasing number of people or communities impacted

Scale Deep:
"Impacting cultural roots"
Changing relationships, cultural values and beliefs, "hearts and minds"
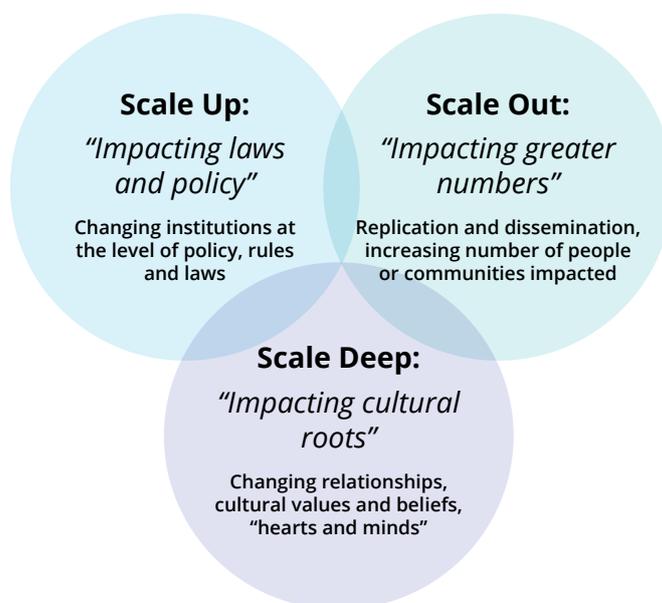
Figure 3. Forms of scaling of social innovations   Riddell & Moore (2015)

Conclusion

Prioritising the needs of women and girls, the elderly and youth, ethnic minorities, sexual and gender minorities, people with disabilities and other marginalised groups, and ensuring they are not left behind, is a key strength of Water for Women projects. Collecting and using disaggregated data, as well as partnering with RHOs, are common strengths. CSOs play critical roles in strengthening the voices and meaningful participation of marginalised groups.

The WASH sector has often focused on the measurable approaches of scaling out – reaching beneficiaries with safe WASH services – and scaling up – influencing policy and laws. LNOB, however, is concerned not only with policy, but with social psychology (UNICEF 2021), and CSOs working on LNOB approaches find themselves questioning norms of caste, class, gender, privilege and power. It is clear that to truly ensure no-one is left behind, thoughtful and sustained efforts to rebalance power and privilege are necessary. This analysis of LNOB approaches in WASH shows that CSOs are already beginning to scale deep, and working to shift cultural norms, values and power structures that are root causes of marginalisation.

Further research into three key areas would greatly benefit the sector:

1. exploring trade-offs and challenges in implementation

2. strengthening evaluation of LNOB approaches

3. assessing shifts in norms and attitudes related to WASH outcomes for marginalised people, particularly with respect to leaders and institutions.

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Acknowledgements

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About Water for Women

Water for Women supports improved health, gender equality and wellbeing in Asian and Pacific communities through socially inclusive, sustainable and resilient WASH projects and research. It is the Australian Government's flagship WASH development assistance program, investing AUD 118.9 million over five years. Water for Women is partnering with CSOs and research organisations to deliver 33 projects in 15 countries. Knowledge and learning are central to Water for Women, positioning the Fund as an important contributor to global knowledge development and sharing in 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.

Find out more at
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