



Lessons learned

How adapting tools can lead to disability inclusive protection activities

Syrian crisis response

June 2024

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Syrian Context

The Syrian crisis is a protracted humanitarian crisis in which persons with disabilities continue to face many barriers to access and meaningfully participate in humanitarian assistance at agency, family and community level. There are three regions in Syria that are administered by different authorities. The humanitarian coordination mechanism adapts to each context. The following practice was collected from the Syrian crisis context.

Background

In 2023, Humanity & Inclusion (HI) opened a call to receive applications from protection actors to join learning sessions over three days. The proposed sessions combined a [modular training on disability-inclusive humanitarian programming](#) with a Review, Adapt, Action and Learning laboratory (RAAL Lab) approach. This RAAL Lab approach utilizes a collective learning experience through practice and real-time adaptation of tools used by the participating organisations. It is a capacity strengthening initiative that uses and contextualizes the Disability Reference Group (DRG) learning [modules](#) that are part of the Introduction to disability-inclusive humanitarian action training package. The content of the training, the DRG modules, are evidence-based and were adapted according to the needs and interest of the participating organisations and contextualised by sector and geography including language.

This approach also engages organisations of persons with disabilities or representatives of persons with disabilities as co-facilitators, enhancing the understanding of the disability experience, barriers and exclusion. The laboratory, or “lab” portion of the training allows participants to “experiment” with what they have learned and apply it in real time to gain a sense of how they can apply it when they return to their organisations. This approach also has a very strong follow-up component to provide tailored support post-RAAL Lab. It ensures that any challenges that arise can be addressed and that organisations can be more successful in adapting their tools and creating change in their structures to be more disability inclusive.

More than 60 organisations applied to attend, and 72 participants from 36 organisations were selected to participate in five RAAL Labs. Participants were selected based on their positions, current knowledge and interest in making their organisations and programs more inclusive of persons with disabilities. After the three-day learning and lab sessions ended, HI followed up with the organisations and provided tailored support for up to six months.

This was provided to backup organisations when taking their first steps toward disability-inclusive programming as per their action plans, developed at the end of the RAAL Lab. HI engaged with them to document promising practices and to better understand how the organisations were able to advance toward disability-inclusive programming, applying what they had learned during the RAAL Lab. The aim of documenting the promising practices is to encourage learning between agencies from good initiatives on the ground rather than merely learning and sharing theoretical concepts.

How the practice developed

This practice was collected with an organization working on the Syrian crisis response in late 2023 and early 2024. Two participants from this organisation – a technical coordinator and a field team coordinator – had attended a RAAL Lab session in March 2023. This organisation mainly works in camp management, and they wanted to learn how to remove barriers faced by persons with disabilities, design programs and create tools that are inclusive of persons with disabilities. They prioritised the DRG Module 6 on inclusive project-cycle management; Module 1, Introduction to Disability; and Module 2, Introduction to the IASC Guidelines on the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action.

Prior to attending the RAAL Lab, participants were not aware of the [IASC Guidelines on the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action](#). They were provided a hard copy of the guidelines during the RAAL Lab and then presented the guidelines to the senior manager of their organisation.

During the tool adaptation session on the final day of the RAAL Lab session, participants from this organisation gained confidence in adapting the tools to be inclusive of persons with disabilities. They also became more confident in engaging with persons with disabilities, as they were able to learn from the co-facilitators with disabilities in the session. They then noted the gaps that they had in their own tools and compiled protection tools to initiate a process of revising and changing all their protection tools. The intention was to ensure that any staff who uses the tool, including their partners, would be collecting disability-inclusive data and inform programming that was more inclusive of persons with disabilities.

The process of adapting all their protection tools involved:

1. An initial review identifying the gaps in their tools using the four must-do actions¹ and the knowledge and understanding gained in the RAAL Lab, sharing it with their information management, monitoring and evaluation staff.
2. Sending HI their adapted tools and HI providing further feedback (using four must-do actions as guidance) and joined a meeting to discuss these adaptations with further technical guidance provided, complemented by reasonings for suggested changes.
3. HI and the organisation also briefly discussed the tools and how they will proceed with the monitoring and evaluation team in disseminating the tool and piloting the tools in the field. The monitoring and evaluation staff agreed about the changes making sense.
4. Understanding how inclusive data will help disability-inclusive programming of activities generates the buy-in from staff overcoming initial apprehensions.

RAAL Lab participants from this organization faced some challenges when sharing the disability-inclusive tools with their implementing partners. It is key to exchange with and communicate the importance of being inclusive of persons with disabilities with partners to decrease resistance to using the newly adapted tools. Participants felt supported by their senior management, which helped facilitate the process of change together with the partners. This apprehension was overcome after stating the intention of being more inclusive, which led to more positive perceptions about persons with disabilities from their partner's staff.

¹ The 4 must-do action from the IASC guidelines are: 1 - promote meaningful participation; 2- remove barriers; 3 - empower persons with disabilities and support them, as well as development and humanitarian actors, to develop their capacities; and 4 - disaggregate data for monitoring inclusion

The most significant changes include

The process of adapting the protection tools ensured that regardless of who uses the tool, it is inclusive of the needs, threats and risks of persons with disabilities and sets a precedent to create a more inclusive humanitarian organisation. This practice of adapting the tools is influential on their partners' activities and practices.

This practice also led to attitudinal changes about how persons with disabilities are considered and included. It highlighted the importance of being inclusive. As a result, they reported that they have begun to engage more with persons with disabilities in their activities. An example of this is adapting psychosocial support services to target persons with disabilities. The organisation has also hired staff members with disabilities and encouraged persons with disabilities to apply when advertising for any new position.

Key influencing factors and drivers for change

There are factors that helped facilitate change towards disability inclusion

1. There is a strong willingness and culture for inclusivity in the organisation.
2. Participants secured support from upper management early in the process of change, and this support was helpful when met with resistance from other members of staff or partners
3. The representative participants who attended the RAAL Lab session were eager and willing to make change; they were personally motivated
4. The participants of the learning session can collaborate with other departments in their organisation on cross-sectoral solutions for disability inclusion
5. Attending a RAAL Lab session toward disability inclusion provided skills and confidence to implement this practice



Recommendations to facilitate the replication of this practice

1. When advocating to senior managers, make sure to approach them as a team to have a stronger impact. The two participants who attended the RAAL lab session approached their manager together.
2. The tool adaptation process relies on monitoring and evaluation staff skills and confidence. Engage the staff responsible for implementing data collection tools and analysing the data to make it more disability inclusive.
3. In order to achieve real change, everyone in the organisation must have a role and be aware of their responsibility towards disability inclusion.

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Cover Image

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Illustration of a man and a woman sitting behind a desk, discussing possible solutions to accessibility problems in different spaces. The man presents the issue, and the woman explains possible solutions taking into account different disabilities, showing the pictograms of the Washington Group of Questions on the desk.

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The collection of case studies was a part of the '[From Guidelines to Action \(FG2A\)](#)' project, supporting the operationalization and localization of [IASC Guidelines on inclusion of persons with disabilities in humanitarian action](#), funded by ECHO and the Center for Disaster Philanthropy.

The eight case studies come from protection and food security humanitarian organizations who are working on the Syria and Somalia responses. These organizations participated in Review, Adapt, Action and Learning (RAAL) laboratories on how to make food security or protection programming more disability inclusive. The RAAL Lab is a capacity strengthening initiative and was used in combination with the adapted version of the [DRG Learning modules](#), which are designed to operationalize [the IASC guidelines on disability inclusion](#).

The case studies demonstrate how humanitarian tools and/or operational practices were adapted to become more disability-inclusive.

We hope these case studies will contribute towards fostering inter-agency learning and enhance disability inclusive practices in humanitarian action. We would like to thank the participating organizations for their input and willingness to engage in this process. Please note that for reasons of security the names of organizations from some of the case studies have not been included.

Find out more by contacting us at inclusion@hi.org

