



Lessons learned

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## Strengthening the capacity of a gender-inclusive community committee to become disability inclusive

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Syrian crisis response

June 2024

LL 25-8



## Syrian context

The Syrian crisis is a protracted humanitarian crisis in which persons with disabilities continue to face many barriers to access and meaningfully engage in humanitarian action. There are three regions in Syria that are administered by different authorities. The humanitarian coordination mechanism and response adapt 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 back up 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.

## Introduction and context of the practice

The following case study was collected with an international organisation. Three participants from this organisation who held gender and protection officer positions attended the RAAL Lab. They were motivated to strengthen their capacity, knowledge and skills on including persons with disabilities and also to apply an intersectional lens to their work which includes disability. They felt that donors are prioritising disability, but that their organisation currently does not have the knowledge and skills to follow through. They were keen to learn about mainstreaming disability in their programming and prioritised Module 6 on inclusive project cycle management of the Disability Reference Group (DRG) modules as well as Module 1, Introduction to Disability, and Module 2, Introduction to the IASC Guidelines on the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action.

## How the practice developed

The organisation works in close collaboration with a community committee that represents its community. The original aim of the community committee is to engage with the community around gender equality and localization through engagement with larger NGOs. The organisation identified that in this work, neither the international organisation nor committee had sufficient information about the actual situation of persons with disabilities and their needs. To address this gap, the international organisation and committee decided to strengthen the committee's capacities to also become more disability inclusive.

This community committee wanted to create a gender-inclusive community and to ensure that women are not discriminated against or treated unfairly based on their gender. It originally consisted of fifteen persons without disabilities. For over a year, this international organisation has been working with and engaging this committee, which represent three different districts; each member defines their role depending on their capacity. At the moment, the international organisation supports processes for developing the governance structure and feminist vision of the community committee.

To kickstart the inclusion of persons with disabilities, the international organisation started off by meeting with the committee and began identifying the main barriers that persons with disabilities face in society and what being disability inclusive means at a community level. When doing this, the committee also invited four persons with disabilities to join the committee, for a total of nineteen committee members, with and without disabilities. Through discussions, they developed their vision of their community to not only be gender inclusive but to acknowledge the barriers persons with disabilities face in the community and how they can be removed. This also included applying an intersectional approach to their work between gender and disability.

## The most significant changes include

The international organisation staff conducted a protection risk analysis for persons with disabilities, engaging the community committee in a workshop to better understand the protection risks. They then designed an awareness campaign with key messages based on the protection risks identified.

A second initiative conducted by the community committee was targeting a farmers and agriculture association. They carried out a workshop on the inclusion of persons with disabilities and what barriers persons with disabilities face in this vocation, and how they can access the labour market. The organisation's aim is to grow the local economy and improve the economic situation of families with members that have disabilities. The organisation met the committee to plan and strategize on becoming more disability inclusive.

The organisation facilitated further meaningful exchanges between the community committee and other, mostly local NGOs. These included roundtable discussions to identify and plan the removal of barriers that persons with disabilities face and related future collaborations between the committee and the local NGOs.

The committee worked increasingly on the intersectionality between disability, age and gender, e.g., by focusing on including women with disabilities and elderly people.

The international organisation continues supporting the community committee to strategize around their goals, including through subgrants, logistics and technical support. That way, the committee gains capacities for effective community-level interventions.

In the latest workshop, the committee developed four awareness campaign initiatives:

1. Improving street lightening for accessible and safe night-time mobility.
2. Removing barriers in public transportation by adapting the locations of bus stops and advancing the infrastructure at the bus stops to be barrier-free and for buses to stop in a location where persons can easily get on and off, including wheelchairs users.
3. Advancing access to sexual and reproductive health services through challenging social norms that pose attitudinal barriers to women with disabilities.
4. Removing social barriers and negative attitudes and perceptions at the community level about persons with disabilities through events with recreational activities that are fun for everyone with and without disabilities.

A change the committee aim to achieve in the near future is to engage more municipalities and government ministries, as they can provide support and resources to local community efforts.

## Key influencing factors and drivers for change

The motivation of the staff who attended the RAAL Lab was key for them to follow up with the action plan that they had created during the final day of the learning sessions. The participants who attended the workshop also hold a role that allows them to build the capacity of local stakeholders and actors. This position helped in ensuring that they can build the capacity of the community committee in becoming more disability inclusive.

The international organisation established a trusted and safe space with the committee to support the committee in expanding their scope of responsibility and becoming a space to foster the inclusion of persons with disabilities. This included establishing participatory processes and being transparent about the goals and aims of the organisations.

Finally, the committee members are motivated and committed to their communities and to achieving positive change through more inclusive neighbourhoods.



## Recommendations to facilitate the replication of this practice

1. Working with existing gender-inclusive community committees on disability inclusion can be a start to better representing persons with disabilities from their neighbourhood. This can become a viable way to enhance reduction of barriers to assistance that exist at the community level.
2. Before starting, it is recommended to well understand the community with which you are engaging to ensure that the aims and goals are set by them. This can be done through engaging with the committee after and/or during a protection risk assessment. This can help understanding the social norms, including those relating to gender and disability.
3. Discussing in a workshop how identified risks and barriers can be removed from within the community, especially those that relate to social norms. Community committees can be supported to implement inclusive awareness campaigns they identified, in order to reduce attitudinal barriers faced by persons with disabilities.

# Copyright

## Cover Image

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Illustration of several persons in a street of an urban Syrian neighborhood, with fields in the background.

Several persons with and without disabilities are walking around and discussing in the street. There is a mix of men and women. Some of them are dressed in yellow as they belong to the community committee, working on disability inclusion in the area.

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Humanity & Inclusion,  
138 Avenue des Frères Lumière,  
69371 Lyon cedex 08, France

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For more information, contact us at [inclusion@hi.org](mailto:inclusion@hi.org)





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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](mailto:inclusion@hi.org)

