



Lessons learned

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## Disability Inclusion Working Group: a way to cascade learning and transform it into action

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Syrian crisis response

June 2024

LL 25-5



## 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 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 one of the participating organisations, an international organisation. Three participants from this organisation attended the training. These three representatives held project management and monitoring and evaluation positions. The participants were motivated to attend this training because their roles require them to be more inclusive of persons with disabilities but felt they lacked the technical skill and capacity to do so. This organisation is moving towards disability inclusion, which is not uncommon for humanitarian organisations; however, their staff feel unprepared to implement these changes. They had requested to learn about adapting their tools to be more disability inclusive, specifically their assessment, monitoring and evaluation tools. They had selected and prioritised the following Disability Reference Group ([DRG](#)) Modules: Module 1, Introduction to Disability; Module 2, Introduction to the IASC Guidelines on the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action; and Module 4, Accessibility, Universal Design and Reasonable Accommodation.

## How the practice developed

After attending the RAAL Lab, participants wanted to propagate the learning and the skills gained from the training more sustainably throughout their organisation and to build strategy, capacity and accountability for disability inclusion. They decided to conduct their own internal learning session. They ran a session built on the RAAL Lab session they had participated in - while adapting the content to their own staff's interest. This action followed our recommendation to adapt the content according to the needs and interests of the participants. This also points to the participants' confidence not only in providing the session internally but adapting the content accordingly. After this internal workshop, the participants decided to create a Disability Inclusion Working Group (DIWG) within their organisation to continue working collaboratively with their

colleagues on creating change in their organisation to become more disability inclusive in a coordinated and meaningful way. This group consists of staff members who are focal points for inclusion in each of their respective sectors, or teams.

After their workshop, the RAAL Lab participants started a process to reach out to potential staff members to join this group and become disability-inclusion focal points. There was no strict criteria or conditions to join the working group but rather staff who were interested and motivated to take part. There are nine members in the group. They have one DIWG coordinator who is also the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) coordinator within their organisation. There are representatives from each of the following sectors in the DIWG

- Protection
- WASH
- Shelter
- Education
- Information Management
- country director

This practice is still in its early stages within their organisation and so does not yet have defined roles and responsibilities for each member. However, they have begun to distribute the roles and responsibilities as and when action points arise. The group meets at least once per month, as well as on a need basis.

The working group is tasked with the responsibility to identify the highest needs and gaps in inclusive programming and data collection and present it to the country director to make requests for the necessary resources. During the outreach process of inviting staff to be members of the working group, they encouraged the participation of staff members with disabilities. There are at least two DIWG staff members who are persons with disabilities.

The illustration of the practice represents the DIWG getting together during their monthly meeting to discuss entry points for making their programming and activities more inclusive of persons with disabilities and what actions they can take.

The working group occupies an advisory role rather than a decision-making role. The members want to build their knowledge and skills further before being able to make more definitive decisions. This is understandable considering that this is a recently established group.

The group is also responsible for following up with each of their respective sectors. They support the efforts for all sectors to be more inclusive; however, they have mentioned that they lack the technical capacity to fully support them. To address this gap, they call for support from external actors, such as HI, to provide necessary technical expertise. This practice was established to also create a more formal structure within the organisation to implement more inclusive activities and programs within the organisation.

One of the initial actions of the DIWG was to assist with the development of terms of reference for a consultant to identify the “inclusion gaps.” They also aimed at developing a job description for an inclusion and diversity officer, a new position that they are recruiting for.

One of the reasons the DIWG is in place is because the organisation currently lacks the needed capacity to make their activities more disability inclusive. Through this working group and by hiring a consultant and new staff, the inclusion and diversity officer, they aim to have more technical support and build capacities. The goals of the working group will also be discussed with the consultant as they identify the main gaps in the organisation for disability inclusion.

## **The most significant changes include**

The most significant impact of the RAAL Lab was the creation of the DIWG toward making the organisation more disability inclusive and mobilising for change through this working group.

The working group is leading the change, continuously, within the organisation. Two examples of change that have occurred is the launch of the call to hire an inclusion and diversity officer and a consultant to identify disability-inclusion gaps in the organisation. The working group also led to identifying resources that are needed for the staff to make their activities and practices more inclusive of persons with disabilities.

This practice brings together motivated and concerned staff members who are willing to support inclusive activities within the organisation. This working group is also a reflective space for members, to discuss and identify tangible steps towards an inclusive organization and programming.

Having a working group means that the members can support, inspire, build confidence and empower each other. It becomes a place to plan and implement joint action between different sectors. For instance, they have begun to identify the disability-specific barriers within a camp for internally displaced people. It is planned to remove the identified barriers through accessibility works in the camp first, before moving on to applying the same approach to their educational programs and facilities.

## Key influencing factors and drivers for change

A factor that was driving this change was having a supportive country director who follows up with the activities and the progress of the DIWG. The director demonstrates and communicates leadership on inclusion by action, participating in the working group him/herself. This is encouraging and motivating for all.

Secondly, the culture in the organisation is open to acknowledge gaps and challenges. The teams feel encouraged to recognise and identify what they lack and where they can begin to address these issues. This is a key precondition. They have begun to collect data on the percentage of persons with disabilities in their diversity among their target group, for example. The three persons initially attending the RAAL Lab motivated new colleagues to review and adapt their protection tools and supported this process.

Lastly, the timing of the training was key as it coincided with the process of discussing and questioning how they can make their organisation more disability inclusive, including the data collection. They have a comprehensive Information Management (IM) system, so they rely on this data to monitor and evaluate programs. One of the main goals identified was to focus on ensuring that their data collection processes were disability inclusive.



## Recommendations to facilitate the replication of this practice

1. If you have not previously worked on disability inclusion, we recommend that you start learning and reflecting with the first and second DRG modules, which provide a good introduction.
2. Secure buy-in and interest from upper management to support institutional and permanent change towards supporting the inclusion of persons with disabilities and implementing the four must-do actions of the IASC guidelines.
3. At least two participants from any organisation should attend any external training to generate a dynamic that is vibrant enough to support implementation of newly learned skills.
4. Build an internal working group/task force or cell in your organisation with and around interested and committed program staff to inspire change.
5. Take initiative in your organisation and develop a clear process with outcomes and goals to achieve change towards disability inclusive humanitarian programming. Define each step with feasible and realistic aims.
6. A main challenge faced was gaining support and interest from other colleagues in their organisation. It is challenging to engage with staff that consider the issue not to be relevant or outside their scope of responsibility. To overcome similar challenges, raise awareness among other staff on the importance and significance of being disability inclusive, as well as their responsibility towards reaching the most at risk in emergencies.

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## Cover Image

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Illustration of a group of 8 men and women of different nationalities, and ethnicities conversing about methodologies to make workspaces more inclusive. They are sitting at a table, amongst them is a man with visual impairment, a woman using a wheelchair. Each person is contributing ideas to the conversation based on their experiences. Above them on the wall is an infographic showing exclusion and inclusion, as well as different pictograms representing inclusion, specific requirements, barrier removal.

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## Lessons learned

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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)

