Logo: IWA - the international water association

Title: Factsheet / Engaging vulnerable groups in the implementation of Climate Resilient WSP

Photo credit: Lesly Derksen / Unsplash
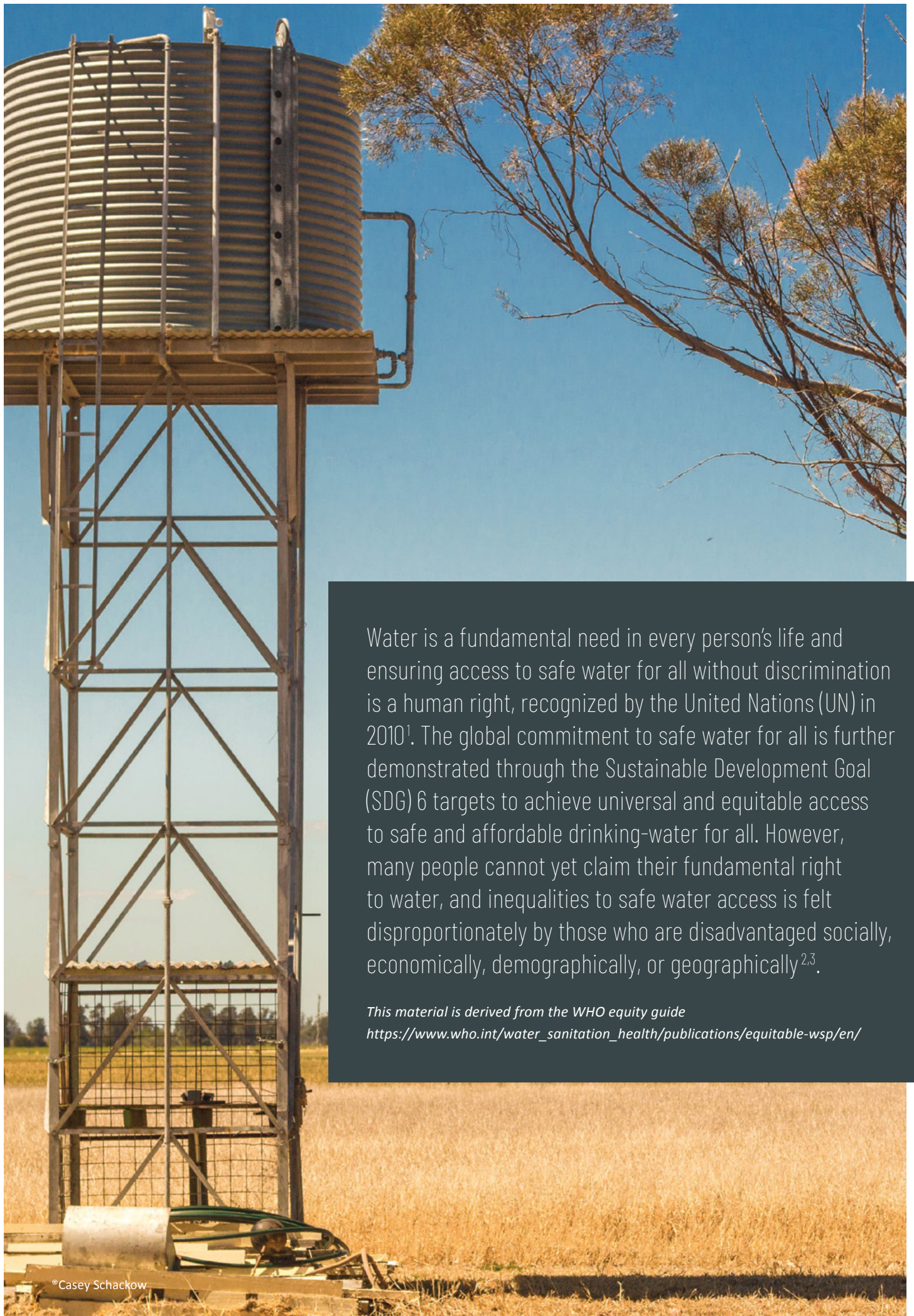
IWA
the international
water association

Factsheet

Engaging vulnerable groups

in the implementation of Climate Resilient WSP

Water is a fundamental need in every person's life and ensuring access to safe water for all without discrimination is a human right, recognized by the United Nations (UN) in 2010[1]. The global commitment to safe water for all is further demonstrated through the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 targets to achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking-water for all. However, many people cannot yet claim their fundamental right to water, and inequalities to safe water access is felt disproportionately by those who are disadvantaged socially, economically, demographically, or geographically[2,3].

This material is derived from the WHO equity guide
https://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/publications/equitable-wsp/en/

What are vulnerable groups?

Both vulnerable and marginalized groups have disadvantages that need to be considered in provision of safe water and accessible water supply. Those that are vulnerable, have a characteristic or trait which can increase their risk to harm or injury such as from contaminated water. In water safety planning, vulnerable groups can include children, the elderly and people living with chronic diseases. They have special needs that need to be considered. Marginalized people are those experiencing inequality, such that they may not be able to access water and sanitation services, due to poverty, tenure status, remote location or for reasons of discrimination[4]. Such groups are not able to lead a comfortable life and lack developmental opportunities. Furthermore, they most often find it difficult to fully exercise their human rights including access to water and sanitation[5].

These set of people are usually at a disadvantage and for this reason there is an urgent need to protect and pay special attention to their rights[6]. Despite the divergence over the meaning of vulnerability, it can be considered as "the characteristics of a person or group and their situation that influences their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist, and recover from the impact of a hazardous event[7]. Such hazardous events can directly or indirectly affect the health status of the individual or population.

The impact of climate change on vulnerable groups

Climate change and extreme weather conditions can impact anyone, but in a world where almost a billion people lack access to safe drinking water, and 2.5 billion do not have access to sanitation, climate change is expected to bring about major impacts through water supplies. This can have devastating impacts on vulnerable populations such as children, the elderly, the disabled, the poor and women.

Climate-related events such as intense rainfall, severe storms, dry spells, extremely hot days and storm surges can damage or destroy water supply infrastructure. This is expected to cause stress on the available water resources bringing about water scarcity. The scarcity may result in increased competition for water use between for example domestic, agricultural, and industrial sectors.

In such events, the physical accessibility of water sources is affected, and this can deprive the basic needs of marginalized groups, especially women, children, persons with disabilities, and the elderly. Again, water scarcity associated with climate-related events also causes a shift to alternative sources that may likely be polluted with sediments, pathogens and pesticides, which impact the health of the vulnerable population[8]. The population therefore becomes more susceptible to health effects associated with the pollution of water sources by virtue of their preexisting health condition, age or residing in areas that do not promote good health.

Lastly, climate change impacts indirectly on the affordability of water services mainly because of reconstruction of infrastructure destroyed during floods. The increased demand and competition over water as well results in increased prices thus getting out of reach for the extremely poor people[9].

Equitable Water Safety Planning

Water Safety Plans (WSPs) provide a good opportunity to achieve the SDGs and engage vulnerable groups during their implementation. They are widely recognized as the most reliable and effective way to consistently manage drinking water supplies through a comprehensive risk assessment and risk management approach to ensure the safety and safeguard public health. With implementation in over 93 countries worldwide, many countries have developed policy instruments to demonstrate strong political support for WSPs[10]. This is done through implementing national strategies, standards, or frameworks to serve as critical drivers for WSP implementation.

The WHO guide to equitable water safety planning outlines 3 reasons to ensure equity is integrated into WSP to improve access to water services by vulnerable groups[2]. Firstly, having an equity approach will help make sure that the benefits of a WSP and access to safe water encompass vulnerable groups. Water has diverse users hence the need to understand each one's experience with water. Equitable WSP for instance considers the experience by each user group and communicate results to ensure that all users have access to safe water. If this is not done, it is likely some user groups may be excluded from WSP benefits.

Secondly, it can reduce discrimination that might happen to these groups in the WSP process. For example, it might be recommended to reduce access to a water source as it results in contamination. But there may be marginalized people who rely on this source for their livelihood, so there needs to be consideration of the impacts of reducing access and what alternatives can be provided.

Finally, the effectiveness of the WSP can be strengthened with an inclusive approach. WSP is a living document that requires continuous review and improvement to ensure its effectiveness. An effective integration of equity consideration during each review and revision provides an opportunity for WSP implementation process to strengthen equity consideration and outcomes based on the experience of the different diverse groups.

Inclusion of vulnerable groups in WSPs

WSP is comprised of 11 modules (WHO/IWA, 2009) which can be grouped into four (4) broad categories: Preparation, System Assessment, Monitoring, Management and Communication, Feedback, and improvement.

Equal participation begins at the WSP preparation stage (Module 1) by ensuring the WSP team is comprised of meaningful participation of different genders and vulnerable groups and have received appropriate training on developing WSP.

After WSP preparation, system assessment (Module 2) should include identification of all the different users. Understanding diverse water user (and non-user) groups will help the WSP team to identify all hazardous events and appropriate control measures (Modules 3 and 4), and to develop a comprehensive and equitable improvement plan (Module 5).

During the monitoring stage (Module 6 and 7), the WSP team and auditors/surveillance agencies should check whether the control measures are benefiting all users equitably and think about how to monitor the satisfaction and water quality of diverse users, particularly different genders, and vulnerable groups.

During the management and communication stage (Modules 8 and 9), it is be important for the WSP team to consider what actions might be necessary for the emergency response plan and education programmes to meet the diverse needs of different genders and vulnerable groups.

Finally, the feedback and improvement stage (Module 10) provide an opportunity to review and confirm that equity has been integrated into the WSP process, aiming for incremental improvements over time.

Figure 1 summarizes how the WSP team can integrate equity considerations into the WSP process.

Preparation

Assembling the WSP Team

- Seek meaningful participation of women, men and disadvantaged groups
- Seek training on the importance of considering equity

System Assessment

Describing the System

- Identify diverse users (and non-user) groups
- Investigate different user experiences with water

Identifying Hazards

- Consider all user experiences when identifying hazardous events

Improvement planning

- Consider prioritizing improvements that benefit disadvantaged groups
- Identify control measures that address root causes of hazardous events
- Assess proposed control measures for positive or negative equity outcomes
- Ensure equitable communication and participation in control measure selection and implementation

Feedback and Improvement

Reviewing the WSP

- Strengthen equity integration during ongoing review and revision

Management and Communication

Developing Management Procedures and Supporting Programmes

- Consider all groups when developing communication plans

Diverse Users

Monitoring

Operational Monitoring

- Monitor control measure effectiveness to ensure equitable benefit

Verifying WSP Effectiveness

- Monitor water quality and consumer satisfaction for all user groups

Figure 1. Summary of how the Water Safety Planning team can integrate equity considerations into the WSP process

Benefits to utilities in including vulnerable groups in WSPs

• Forming a WSP team to lead the WSP implementation first requires the engagement of key stakeholders for the necessary training and awareness. Seeking meaningful participation all users within this team, particularly women and vulnerable groups within the team enables them to influence decisions and contribute in ways that are effective and empowering. They provide access to information on their different experiences with water which helps to ensure that the WSP will meet the needs of all the different user groups.

• Through identifying the diverse community members, including vulnerable groups, the many ways in which users experience water can be well understood by the utility and instances where the entire community is not served by the water supply system flagged.

• Through the involvement of different groups, the utility can well understand the root cause of exposure to different hazardous events and design effective and equitable control measures.

• By recognising and engaging with vulnerable groups, the utility can explore the barriers and find appropriate measures to increase access.

Further resources

A guide to equitable water safety planning (WHO,2019) - This document describes how, with relatively modest efforts, the water safety plan (WSP) approach can bring tangible improvements in water quality and availability for all users. By providing step-by-step guidance for all WSP stakeholders, as well as good practice examples from a broad range of countries and contexts, this document serves as a practical tool to help achieve safe water for all.

Manual on the Human Rights to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation For Practitioners (IWA 2016) - The Manual introduces a human rights perspective that will add value to informed decision making in the daily routine of operators of public utilities, managers of private sector companies, coordinators of public-private partnerships and NGO leaders providing water supply and sanitation services, and the independent regulators of such services. It also encourages its readership to engage actively in national dialogues where the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation are translated into national and local policies, laws and regulations.

Making Rights Real - "Making Rights Real" consist of three documents that are intended for use in one-on-one conversations between WASH sector professionals and local government officials, and that can then be referred back to. The materials are purposefully concise and focus entirely on the practical value of human rights (https://www.rural-water-supply.net/en/resources/details/840)

REFERENCES

[1] United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), Resolution 64/292. The Human Right to Water and Sanitation, 28 July 2010, para 1.

[2] WHO & UNICEF (2014). Progress on drinking water and sanitation: 2014 update. Geneva: World Health Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund

[3] WHO & UNICEF (2017). Progress on drinking water, sanitation and hygiene: 2017 update and SDG baselines. UNICEF/WHO Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene. United Nations Children's Fund and World Health Organization

[4] WHO (2019) A guide to equitable water safety planning. https://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/publications/equitable-wsp/en/

[5] University of Pune. (2012). Human Rights of Vulnerable & Disadvantaged Groups. http://www.unipune.ac.in/university_files/1Human%20Rights%20of%20 Vulnerable%20&%20Disadvantaged%20Groups_211212.pdf

[6] WHO (2019) A guide to equitable water safety planning. https://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/publications/equitable-wsp/en/

[7] Wisner, B., Blaikie, P. M., Blaikie, P., Cannon, T., & Davis, I. (2004). At risk: natural hazards, people's vulnerability and disasters. Psychology Press.

[8] B. C. Bates, Z.W. Kundzewicz, S. Wu and J.P. Palutikof, Climate Change and Water, Technical Paper VI, International Panel on Climate Change (Geneva, 2008), p. 2.

[9] United Nations. Climate Change and the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation1 Position Paper. Available at: https://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/water/iexpert/ docs/ClimateChange_HRtWS.pdf

[10] WHO/IWA (2017). Global status report on water safety plans: A review of proactive risk assessment and risk management practices to ensure the safety of drinking-water

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL WATER ASSOCIATION

The International Water Association (IWA) is the leading network and global knowledge hub for water professionals, and anyone committed to the future of water. IWA, which is a non-profit organisation, has a legacy of over 70 years.

IWA connects water professionals in over 130 countries to find solutions to global water challenges as part of a broader sustainability agenda. IWA connects scientists with professionals and communities so that pioneering research provides sustainable solutions.

In addition, the association promotes and supports technological innovation and best practices through international frameworks and standards. Through projects, events, and publications, IWA engages with its members to stimulate innovative ideas and content in support of IWA's vision of a water-wise world.

The Water Safety Plan (WSP) programme has been an important part of the Strategic Programmes since 2011. Through this programme, IWA has coordinated projects supporting the implementation of WSPs in various countries in Africa including: Burkina Faso, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Morocco, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda.

www.iwa-network.org