

WASH experiences of older people living with incontinence in a changing climate: a case of Cyclone Idai, Malawi

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Background

Many older people face challenges with incontinence, a complex and stigmatizing condition where a person cannot control the flow of their urine or faeces. They face significant challenges, which can be exacerbated by climate shocks, requiring more privacy, water, soap and time to manage their hygiene needs, but face problems accessing WASH to fulfil these needs safely. There is currently very limited awareness of the scope and implications of the problem within the WASH sector. This research explored the challenges faced by older people living with incontinence and their caregivers among the 110, 110 people displaced by Cyclone Idai in Malawi in 2019, one of the most destructive storms to have hit sub-Saharan Africa, intensified by climate change. Older people living with incontinence were living in shelters in camps after being displaced by Cyclone Idai and had lost their homes

Research aims

- Investigate how the sector can better engage with and support people with incontinence
- Identify needs and priorities of older people with incontinence in climate affected areas
- Understand coping mechanisms

Methodology

Fieldwork was led by Oxfam, HelpAge International and local Older Persons Associations in Blantyre, Chikwawa and Nsanje districts in Malawi. Methods included focus group discussions; small group discussions led by older people themselves; household visits and facility audits; key informant interviews; quantitative needs assessment and workshops with key informants. Participatory tools used in focus groups, small group discussions and household visits included soul mate interviewing, timelines and sorting and ranking exercises



Findings

- Water points and boreholes were too far to reach, and participants relied on river water.
- Older people leaked urine and faeces and needed to go to the toilet often. They were stigmatised due to smell
- Accessible toilets and bathing facilities were unavailable. Pit latrine blocks were susceptible to collapse after rainfall and could not be used by older people, who lacked privacy to manage their needs. Older people with mobility challenges could not use facilities due to the need to squat
- Older people lacked access to incontinence pads and diapers
- Incontinence had severe psycho-social impacts on older people: depression, thoughts of suicide due to being unable to meet their WASH needs, withdrawal from society, and feeling isolated
- Different coping mechanisms for incontinence included using cow skins as mattress protectors, jerry cans as make-shift bed pans clothes from leaks; using pieces of cloth in underwear and piles of blankets to protect bedding and changing clothes and bedding when they have leaks
- Caregivers faced isolation due to being unable to leave the home due to care demands, lack of socialising, emptying older people's chamber pots, long queues at water points, and for young carers, school drop-out.



Impact of the research and application

- Examples of methodologies that can be adapted and used in regions affected by climate-related events globally to engage with people impacted by incontinence
- Identify non-food items to be included in distribution kits
- Potential to include people with incontinence in climate-responsive WASH programming
- Demonstrated the scale of the issue among older people in areas of Malawi affected by cyclone exacerbated by climate change
- Older people living with incontinence who are displaced by climate-related events need accessible and improved WASH facilities, water, soap, reusable incontinence pads, bedding, mattresses, assistive devices, psychosocial support, and palliative care
- WASH actors need to create greater awareness of incontinence to reduce stigma
- More evidence of experiences of incontinence in climate affected areas is needed to scale up support
- The WASH sector needs to engage with and be alert to the hidden issues vulnerable people with incontinence face, which are exacerbated by climate shocks.

Conclusion

- Living with incontinence in climate-affected areas creates many barriers to independence, stigma, and discrimination and greater support is needed from the WASH sector
- Incontinence, as well as other hidden issues, must be considered in WASH responses to ever increasing climate events

'There is no water in the community, we have to travel a long distance; older people cannot manage this alone. There's not enough water storage and we lack soap. Not having water worsens the situation'

"I went to traditional healers, but they told me there was nothing they could do, it was just old age"

in the past months my mom could not cope with the idea of me taking care of her, she felt like she was making life hard for me, she is a burden to everyone in the family, she was really aggressive whenever you wanted to change or help her bath and she wished she had died. I knew how painful it was so I took the courage to talk her through and I told her there is no need to worry, she is my mother and I will do anything to help her". (Carer)

"I went to the hospital in Nsanje, there was no help there"

"It has become quite more stressful as it limits them in doing a lot of things" (carer)

'If there is no soap they can't avoid smelling',
'sometimes people use ash to wash hands when they have no soap.'

He stops doing what he was doing before like going to church, visiting friends (Carer)

".. One thing that is so annoying with these toilets we have is that they collapse before its even full and you have to begin constructing a new one."

"I sometimes develop sores because of the urine which gives some pains."

"It becomes a challenge to always be clean because mostly we have few clothes"

"She usually refuses taking water during the night with fear of urinating on herself more."