

Disability-Inclusive Livelihoods: Lessons learned from Concern Worldwide's experience in Afghanistan

This learning paper shares practical lessons from Concern Worldwide's experience of integrating disability inclusion into livelihoods programming through the Inclusive Livelihoods Recovery and Community Resilience in Afghanistan (FARAGIR) programme.

Context

Afghanistan faces a prolonged humanitarian crisis shaped by conflict, economic instability, displacement and climate shocks. These pressures have weakened livelihoods and food systems, with persons with disabilities often disproportionately affected. Stigma, discrimination, limited mobility, unemployment, and reduced access to services, markets and income opportunities can deepen poverty, debt and food insecurity. Disability-inclusive livelihoods programming is therefore essential to support recovery, resilience and equal participation.

Programme Overview

Funded by the European Union, the Inclusive Livelihoods Recovery and Community Resilience in Afghanistan programme (FARAGIR) was a three-year programme (January 2023 to December 2025) implemented by Concern Worldwide, Welthungerhilfe, Humanity & Inclusion and lead local partner Afghanaid across six of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. Concern implemented activities in Takhar and Badakhshan provinces in the north-east of the country, reaching 45 communities across four districts.

FARAGIR aimed to safeguard livelihoods and food security for vulnerable households affected by Afghanistan's prolonged humanitarian crisis. The programme strengthened community-based employment, income-generating opportunities and support for micro and small businesses, with particular attention to women and persons with disabilities. It also worked to improve food security through climate-resilient production and processing, watershed management and sustainable natural resource management.

Rather than treating disability inclusion as a stand-alone activity, the programme mainstreamed it across implementation. This included identifying barriers to participation, adapting livelihood options and training approaches, supporting access to community groups and financial services, and engaging communities to strengthen the rights and participation of persons with disabilities.

The Approach

Disability inclusion was integrated across the programme cycle with technical support from Humanity & Inclusion, a dedicated focal point and a Disability Inclusion Working Group. Staff capacity was strengthened, while disability considerations were embedded in assessments, value chain analysis, targeting, activity design and monitoring. The Washington Group Questions were used alongside a formal needs assessment, referrals from Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), focus group discussions, community consultations and disability registers to identify persons with disabilities and understand their needs, preferences, capacities and accessibility requirements.

Accessibility and community engagement

The programme addressed physical and social barriers through community awareness sessions with religious leaders, elders and local stakeholders. These sessions aimed to reduce stigma and promote the rights and participation of persons with disabilities. Training materials were adapted into accessible formats; for example, practical sessions, instructional videos and pictorial materials were used for vegetable and dairy processing. Training venues were selected for accessibility, and office infrastructure was improved through ramps and adapted toilet facilities. Community volunteers and female focal points also supported outreach and follow-up with vulnerable households.

As a specialist consortium partner, Humanity & Inclusion led technical guidance on assistive devices and related accessibility adaptations. This enabled the programme to provide assistive devices where appropriate, based on individual assessment. In contexts where such specialist capacity is not embedded within the consortium, Concern would refer participants to qualified disability service providers for assessment, provision, repair or replacement of assistive devices.

Inclusive livelihood activities

Persons with disabilities participated in on-farm, off-farm and non-farm livelihood activities based on individual capacity assessments and expressed preferences. Where needed, activities were adapted to reduce physical barriers, travel requirements or other accessibility constraints. Examples included carpet weaving, tailoring, poultry, animal husbandry, kitchen gardening, and fruit and vegetable processing. Participants were also integrated into Self-Help Groups (SHGs), where they engaged in savings, financial management, peer learning and decision-making.

Training was adapted through accessible venues, practical demonstrations, instructional videos, pictorial materials and simplified explanations. Participants received capacity-building in financial literacy, entrepreneurship, business management, agriculture, processing and life skills. Local Steering Committees, including persons with disabilities, supported transparent targeting and inclusion, while religious leaders helped raise community awareness on the rights and inclusion of women and persons with disabilities.

Financial inclusion was further strengthened through seed grants and revolving loan schemes, enabling investment in small businesses and reducing financial barriers.

Market linkages connected participants, including persons with disabilities, to agro-input suppliers, traders and service providers, improving access to inputs, services and value chains.

Persons with disabilities also participated in adapted cash-for-work activities linked to watershed management, irrigation canal rehabilitation and road-related infrastructure. Tasks were assigned according to individual capacities, supported by accessible training methods, community awareness-raising on disability rights and inclusion, and where required, assistive devices assessed and provided through specialist support.

Social, economic and environmental inclusion

The programme contributed to the social, economic and environmental inclusion of persons with disabilities by improving access to livelihood activities, financial services, community groups and local decision-making spaces. Participation in SHGs, Local Steering Committees, Watershed Management Committees, community planning processes and natural resource management activities helped strengthen participants' visibility, confidence and voice in community priorities and resource allocation. Although baseline data on prior participation were not collected, consultations indicated that persons with disabilities had previously faced barriers including stigma, limited mobility, lack of information and restricted access to decision-making spaces.

Community Behaviour Change

Community behaviour change was supported through awareness-raising by religious leaders, OPDs and Concern staff. Messages focused on rights, dignity and participation, helping to reduce stigma and misconceptions about women and persons with disabilities. Religious leaders' working groups discussed inclusion in monthly meetings and shared key messages through community gatherings and sermons. Some religious leaders also attended 'training of trainers' sessions led by Islamic scholars on women's rights and disability inclusion.

Programme Impact

Programme monitoring and participant feedback indicate that disability-inclusive livelihoods programming can support economic participation, social inclusion and confidence when practical barriers are addressed through mainstream adaptations and specialist support. Among households with persons with disabilities, food security improved significantly: the proportion reporting fewer months of food insecurity increased from 42.4% to 80.5%. The Food Consumption Score also improved from 39.3% to 47.1%, while the Coping Strategy Index score decreased from 25.7 to 15.5, indicating reduced reliance on coping strategies.

The SHG maturity assessment also found moderate variation in the solidarity and inclusion dimension, with scores ranging from 63% to 81% and Concern Worldwide performing strongest among partners. This dimension considered the presence and participation of persons with disabilities, adaptations to support participation, and equal access to opportunities. The variation may reflect differences in attention to disability inclusion and participatory adaptations across partners.

Key Results

Unless otherwise stated, the figures below relate to Concern's implementation areas in Badakhshan and Takhar. The income, social inclusion, confidence and stress or worry results apply to the entire consortium programme, as these were not disaggregated by individual consortium partner.

Indicator	Result
Persons with disabilities reached	317
Women and girls with disabilities reached	129
Persons with disabilities participating in livelihood activities	317
Persons with disabilities in leadership roles	191 ¹
Participants reporting increased income	50.7%
Participants reporting improved social inclusion	86.6% of women and 81.2% of persons with disabilities at midline
Participants reporting increased confidence across provinces	Above 90% in all provinces
Participants reporting reduced stress or worry across provinces	Above 90% in all provinces

¹ 191 head of households, 58 SHG office bearers, watershed management committee members and influential figures.

Lessons Learned

Design inclusion in from the start. FARAGIR demonstrates the importance of building disability inclusion into programme design, rather than adding it as a separate activity later. Disability considerations were embedded in assessment, targeting, value chain analysis, activity design, monitoring and community engagement. This enabled the programme to identify 317 persons with disabilities and adapt support before livelihood activities were delivered.

Use individual assessment to tailor support. Individual assessment helped match livelihood options to participants' capacities, preferences, mobility and accessibility requirements. This reduced the risk of a 'one-size-fits-all' approach and supported participation in activities such as tailoring, carpet weaving, kitchen gardening, poultry, animal husbandry and food processing. Future livelihoods programmes should therefore assess both barriers and strengths before deciding what support is most appropriate.

Adapt mainstream activities, rather than creating parallel systems. Persons with disabilities participated in the same broad livelihood pathways as other participants, including agriculture, processing, small business activities, SHGs and cash-for-work. Adaptations such as accessible venues, practical demonstrations, pictorial materials, instructional videos and safe task allocation helped make participation more feasible. The experience highlights the importance of strengthening inclusion through practical changes to mainstream delivery.

Combine mainstreaming with specialist expertise. Programme teams can strengthen inclusion through accessible communication, inclusive targeting, adapted training and community engagement. However, some areas require qualified disability expertise. In FARAGIR, Humanity & Inclusion and OPDs supported barrier identification, referral pathways and assistive device assessment and provision, highlighting the value of specialist collaboration within inclusive livelihoods programming.

Address social norms alongside practical barriers. Physical access alone is not enough where stigma, low expectations and exclusion limit participation. Awareness-raising with religious leaders, elders, OPDs and community members helped challenge misconceptions and promote the rights and participation of persons with disabilities. Testimonies from participants and community leaders indicate that these efforts contributed to greater confidence, visibility and involvement in family and community decisions.

Create routes into voice and decision-making. A key lesson is that inclusive livelihoods programming can support more than income generation when it deliberately opens space for participation in community structures. Through SHGs, Local Steering Committees, Watershed Management Committees and community planning processes, persons with disabilities gained opportunities to contribute to decisions affecting livelihoods and natural resource management. The reported participation of 191 persons with disabilities in leadership roles should be interpreted with a clear definition of what counts as leadership.

Invest in disability-disaggregated data and learning. FARAGIR generated useful evidence on participation, income, food security, confidence and social inclusion. However, stronger disability-disaggregated baseline data on participation, decision-making and barriers would have made it easier to measure change over time and understand the programme's contribution. Future programmes should collect disability-disaggregated data from the outset and use it to inform adaptation, learning and accountability.

Testimonials

"I cannot read or write, but through the activities carried out by Concern staff and the Mawlawi, I learned about the rights of persons with disabilities. People in my community now show me more respect, and I feel more confident to speak and take part in family and community decisions. I am also a member of an SHG, where we discuss our rights, businesses and community challenges. With the solar dryer I received, I am now earning an income. These activities have helped me become more active in my community." **Bibi, programme participant.**

“I did not know about the rights of persons with disabilities, and most people in my village did not know either. Through awareness sessions led by our village Mullah, the community learned about the rights of women and persons with disabilities. People now listen to my opinions and invite me to community meetings. I feel more confident to speak up and take part in decisions that affect our village.” Ahmed, programme participant.

“Before this programme, I often felt that my disability made me different from other members of the community. I was not fully aware of my rights, and many people believed that persons with disabilities could not work, make decisions, or contribute to their families and communities. Through the programme’s awareness sessions, training, and community gatherings, I learned about the rights of persons with disabilities. I also understood that having a disability should not be a reason for exclusion or pity. The most meaningful change has been seeing a difference not only in myself but also in the people around me. Community members now understand that persons with disabilities have abilities, skills, and ideas. They involve us more in meetings, listen to our opinions, and give us more opportunities to participate.” Amina, programme participant.

“I serve as head of the Shura in Ahmad Abad village, Rustaq district. Before the FARAGIR programme, there was misunderstanding in our community. Disability was often seen as a weakness and a reason for exclusion, and persons with disabilities were less visible in community life. Through awareness sessions, training, community gatherings, and messages shared by influential community members and religious leaders, people have gained a better understanding of disability rights and inclusion. I have seen a visible shift in our community’s mindset and behaviour. Persons with disabilities are now more aware, more active, and more willing to participate in community issues. Other community members are also more welcoming, involve them in activities, and seek their views during discussions.” Abdul, programme participant



Religious Leaders’ Working Group on the Rights Women and Persons with Disabilities. Photo: Concern Worldwide.



Assistive Device Distribution to Momi. Photo: Concern Worldwide.

Conclusion

FARAGIR shows that disability-inclusive livelihoods programming is most effective when inclusion is built into mainstream systems, rather than treated as a parallel activity. By combining early identification of barriers, individual assessment, accessible delivery, specialist collaboration and community dialogue, the programme helped create more practical routes for persons with disabilities to participate in livelihoods, savings groups, decision-making and natural resource management. The experience offers a transferable model for strengthening dignity, participation and resilience in future livelihoods and recovery programming.