



Persons with Disabilities “Invisible” during Humanitarian Crisis and Displacement

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It is a sad fact that disabled people are the most vulnerable in a disaster. (Christian Blind Mission, Haiti, January 2010)

Background

There are 650 million persons with disabilities worldwide (World Health Organization). This makes up 10% of the world's population. One third of the world's persons with disabilities are children, and two thirds have become disabled secondary to preventable diseases or accidents. There are between 2.6 and 3.7 million persons with disabilities among the world's 37 million refugees and displaced persons due to conflict.

In March 2008, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) came into force. The CRPD is intended as a human rights instrument with an explicit, social development dimension; it adopts a broad categorization of persons with disabilities and reaffirms that all persons with all types of disabilities must enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms (UN Enable, 2010). Building on several existing United Nations Treaties and Conventions, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the CRPD is the first and only international agreement to explicitly stipulate the rights of persons with disabilities in international law.

Article 11 of the CRPD addresses the obligations of States Parties to persons with disabilities during humanitarian crisis. While it does not explicitly state what measures States Parties should take in such situations, Article 11 does reference the need for States Parties to ensure that they comply with their international human rights and international humanitarian law obligations towards persons with disabilities during humanitarian crisis. Read in conjunction with other relevant articles of the CRPD, such as Article 4 (General obligations), Article 9 (Accessibility), Article 10 (Right to life), Article 17 (Protecting the integrity of the person), and Article 19 (Living independently and being included in the community), Article 11 is a powerful tool to ensure that people with disabilities are included in pre-disaster planning, and that the rights and needs of people with disabilities are met during humanitarian crisis and displacement.

This article discusses what happens to persons with disabilities in humanitarian crisis and displacement and offers solutions not only to involve persons with disabilities in future policy and practice, but also to ensure that their rights are not violated.

The Reality for Persons with Disabilities

The International Committee of the Red Cross's (ICRC's) President, Jakob Kellenberger, describes displacement as "one of the most serious humanitarian consequences of armed conflict and other violence worldwide" (*Internal Displacement in Armed Conflict*, ICRC, 2009). Many displaced persons endure extreme hardship, including direct attacks, ill-treatment, sexual violence, and loss of property or livelihood; most are forced to leave their homes because of violations of international humanitarian law committed by conflict parties. The needs of displaced persons must be considered at every stage of the displacement, and protection must parallel assistance.

Humanitarian crisis and displacement are especially difficult for persons with disabilities. In addition to the overarching circumstances (such as violence and forced migration), persons with disabilities often face additional barriers and challenges as they flee, in and around camps, upon return home, and during recovery. These include:

1. Lack of preparedness of first responders

I had to depend on people to fetch me water, food and firewood. I was always the last person to receive things as there was no organized system that considered people with disabilities. No one helped me; . . . everyone was trying to survive. (Refugee Camp survivor who is blind, 2009)

During displacement, wheelchairs, crutches, canes, hearing aids, and prostheses may be destroyed or left behind, increasing the reliance of persons with disabilities on family or strangers to bring them much-needed food and supplies. In educating first responders, it is important they realize that persons with disabilities are not a homogeneous group. Persons with disabilities are as diverse as any other category in the population and disability intersects racial, economic, and class boundaries. Understanding that certain exceptions need to be made for persons with disabilities is paramount. For example, some persons who are visually impaired may need to bring along a service dog during an evacuation, even though standing orders may be to leave these behind.

Without training, first responders are unaware of how to accommodate the diverse needs of persons with disabilities. Do responders know how to evacuate a person who uses a ventilator, or will he or she be left behind?

Camps are established and food is distributed in ways that are inaccessible to persons with disabilities. Such situations threaten the survival of persons with disabilities, increase their susceptibility to secondary disabilities, and violate their human rights.

2. Failure to include persons with disabilities in pre-disaster decision-making processes

A colleague from Tanzania who uses a wheelchair was at school with other children in 1972 when the Ugandan army attacked his country. Everyone evacuated the school and the town. Our friend was the only remaining person at the school, and it took more than a week before his family could come to his rescue. Again, in 1979, his town was attacked by the same army. This time he forced his family to leave without him. Before they left, he insisted they provide him with poison so that he could take his own life before falling into enemy hands. Fortunately, the Tanzania People's Defence Force was mobilized and prevented the Ugandan army from advancing. (DPI Report, 2009)

Disability issues are usually thought to require time, highly specialised expertise, costly infrastructures, and complicated programs. To the extent that government and aid agencies engage in planning for disasters, persons with disabilities and their representative organizations are left out of these decision-making processes. Without a voice, many persons with disabilities feel they are a burden to society and their family, even worthy of abandonment in crisis situations.

3. Lack of visibility and accommodation

In the camp, I could not get to the latrine. I had to [defecate] on the dirty floor. It was dehumanizing. I had no way of keeping clean. I developed pressure sores which became infected down to the bone. (Woman with a physical disability, Pakistan, 2009)

Among the challenges in assisting refugees with disabilities are visibility and inclusivity. Their numbers are not accounted for in statistical reports. Where data does exist, there is lack of consistency in the identification of persons with disabilities, classification of disability, collection methods, analysis, and/or training received by data collectors. The range of disabilities affecting adults and children in conflict settings is not limited to those acquired as a result of landmines or other explosive devices.

Disasters do not discriminate. Those who are most likely to be compromised, injured or killed during a disaster—persons with disabilities—are also the most likely to be the least prepared (Dunn, Disaster News Network, 2003). Every member of the community must be made aware of evacuation. Persons who are deaf or blind may not understand directions or safety efforts. Persons with mental health issues and cognitive disabilities can be particularly traumatized. Failure to provide information that is accessible in both form and content can deprive persons with disabilities of the ability to make informed choices and exercise their human rights.

In post-conflict situations where persons with disabilities are moved out of camps into outlying communities, the transition or recovery is particularly difficult, regardless of how their disability was acquired. Persons with disabilities may have longer distances to travel to find food, fetch water, and access medical care or other essential services. Even when they can access these necessities, some are too weak or physically unable to carry them home. Some families face the indignity of living in make-shift tents, without clean water and proper sanitation (*Pakistan Humanitarian Forum (PHF) Joint Assessment Report, 2009*). Families returning home to rural farms have likely lost their crops, livestock, and irrigation system. New builds may not be physically accessible.

Family support systems that may have been in place previously are often eroded. Many women with disabilities find themselves as head of households but unable to navigate the system due to cultural and safety issues. Some reports suggest that the only safe places for women and girls are around water collection sites (PHF, 2009). Children with disabilities who are orphaned are forced to beg for money to buy food. Others develop secondary disabilities due to poor hygiene, infection and/or malnutrition.

4. Attitudes and practice

I was home alone. The [militants] pushed their way in and raped me, leaving me for dead. I crawled out of the house bleeding and screaming. No one helped me. Some men kicked me out of the way. (Woman with cerebral palsy, Somalia, 2006)

Women refugees may be victims of sexual assault perpetrated at the time of the attack, during flight, while in a refugee camp, and upon return to their community. Women may be assaulted by the military, by gangs, or by other refugees, increasing their susceptibility to sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS.

According to the United Nation's High Commissioner for Human Rights, women with disabilities are two to three times as likely to suffer physical and sexual abuse as women without disabilities. In camps, girls with disabilities are more vulnerable since they are unable to escape, and without the protection of their caretakers.

Cultural myths about disability pose particular barriers for persons with disabilities. In Haiti, for example, people view disability as a curse or punishment. A growing number of children with disabilities are left for dead along roadsides, in hospital courtyards, and in sewers (Jacqueline Charles, *Miami Herald*, 2009). Such beliefs can lead to the needs and even the lives of children with disabilities being considered less important than children without disabilities during crisis and displacement.

The Human Cost of Displacement

In May 2009 the United Nations Refugee Agency revealed that up to 450,000 Pakistanis have been displaced because of conflict in the northwest. Of these, more than 65,000 live in tents in newly-created camps.

Not accounted for in the above statistics are the 3-4 million Afghan refugees accepted by Pakistan during the Afghan War (1978-1992). Many of these individuals are still located within the borders of Pakistan. A significant number of Afghan persons with disabilities placed in the "physical disability camps" at Parachinar (which borders on the Tora Bora region of Afghanistan) are landmine casualties.

Plagued by over two decades of war, poverty and underdevelopment, Afghanistan has about 800,000 people with disabilities out of an estimated total population of 24.5 million. Many of these are also illiterate, unemployed or lack access to health services and other opportunities. One in five households in Afghanistan has a disabled person, according to a 2005 survey conducted by Handicap International.

Next Steps

Urgent action is required to bring attention to the needs of persons with disabilities in humanitarian crisis and displacement. Outreach efforts are needed to identify those with disabilities and to include them in service provision and programs that respect their limitations, preserve their dignity, ensure their safety, and enable them to develop greater independence. It is essential that

- Partnerships are fostered with disabled people's organizations to inform policy on disaster relief, and to provide training to relief workers
- Special provision is made in the setting up and design of camp infrastructure to ensure access and protection of refugees with disabilities, along with their inclusion in all camp functions
- Persons with disabilities are included in resettlement and recovery program planning and implementation
- Children with disabilities receive priority in Best Interest Determination assessments
- Access to appropriate childhood and adult education programs is ensured for refugees with disabilities
- Access to HIV/AIDS information, treatment and care services is available to persons with disabilities, both inside and outside the camps
- Health education is made available in accessible formats and language
- Programs are established to help parents, caretakers, and the wider community gain a better understanding of disability in order to challenge and subvert cultural norms and stereotypes
- The benefits of psychosocial intervention for trauma survivors and persons with mental illness are recognized, and that professionals are trained to provide such services, beginning in the refugee camps
- Universal design principles are used in the reconstruction of all public services from water pumps to health care centres, schools and housing

The Role of Disabled Peoples International

Established in 1981, Disabled Peoples International (DPI) is the largest cross-disability grass roots organization in the world. Today, the DPI cross-disability network has 134 national assemblies (member organizations), well over half of which are located in developing nations. These assemblies, from Peru to Pakistan, from Indonesia to Norway, have witnessed huge changes in the lives of people with disabilities. DPI is equipped to make connections between aid agencies and disabled people's organizations in times of crisis or better yet, before disaster strikes.

Since its inception, DPI is committed to collaboration and partnership building. In 2009, DPI joined forces with a number of organizations, including World Vision, the Women's Refugee Committee, and Handicap International, to provide input for a UN High Commission on Refugees Executive Committee Conclusion on Disability. In 2009, DPI and World Vision signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to promote inclusive communities as an integral part of sustainable development. DPI is working with the UN

International Red Cross, Red Crescent Movement, Government and Non-Government Organizations, and others on the revision of the *Sphere Project Humanitarian Charter* and *Minimum Standards in Disaster Response Handbook*, which enters its second consultation phase January-March 2010. The overarching goal is to improve the quality of assistance to people affected by disaster, and the accountability of states and humanitarian agencies to their constituents, donors, and affected populations.

Some of DPI's member organizations contribute to relief and recovery efforts in different parts of the world. This includes peer support, self-help and advocacy training, wheelchairs and other assistive devices, information on social security programs, and accessibility features for rebuilding efforts. These groups are not humanitarian aid organizations; rather, they fill a gap in service to persons with disabilities, particularly during recovery.

Conclusion

Displaced persons are not homogeneous; their needs are diverse and specific. Persons with disabilities face significant barriers at every stage of displacement: as they flee, in and around camps, en route to and upon return home. While addressing these challenges appears formidable, inclusion of disabled people's organizations in disaster management programs, inter-agency coordination mechanisms and rehabilitation is essential to bringing the immediate and long-term needs of persons with disabilities to light. Of significance and often neglected is the recovery phase of displacement which allows for education, training and self-sustainability of persons with disabilities.

A greater respect for international humanitarian law as a means of enhancing the protection of those who have had to flee their homes will go a long way to ensure that the rights of persons with disabilities under Article 11 of the CRPD is upheld.

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