

Mainstreaming Disability Issues in Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR)

Overview of disaster and persons with disabilities: The hazards of Developing Countries are massive due to vulnerability of the country and its people. The high population density, widespread poverty, lack on awareness and education, enormous pressure on rural land, and an economic system that relies heavily on agricultural production causes this vulnerability. Generally due to the very poor socio-economic conditions, the vulnerability of disasters is manifold. Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), children and women as well as the elderly people are particularly vulnerable. Our experiences show that big numbers of the deaths during disasters are persons with disabilities, women and children.

Due to unstoppable natural disasters, people of developing countries, over the years have tried to develop their own coping mechanism to live with natural disasters. Concurrently, many of the local and non-local initiatives to prevent/reduce the effects have largely failed to bring about a significant or permanent solution to the problem due to the nature of disasters.

Persons with Disabilities are generally not well considered, especially in a situation of poverty and/or disaster. In fact, when daily life is already tough for poor people, families and communities consider a disabled family member as a «burden». In a disaster situation, this phenomenon is increased.

PWDs have difficulty moving, hearing, seeing, communicating and or learning. But they have the same needs and perform the same activities as other members of the community. They may need specific support related to their disability and their living environment (assistive devices, caregivers, or a modified physical environment) to enable them to participate fully in these daily activities. In an emergency situation, when all members of the community are placed in a vulnerable situation, a PWD may face extra challenges if these special needs are not met.

Specific needs of persons with disabilities: Vulnerable group needs to be addressed particularly by fulfilling their needs to participate in the society. Lack of awareness of different stakeholders makes persons with disability unprepared because of their inadequate social interaction and participation as well as

communication. This can generate more complications for themselves and their impairment.

PWDs are more vulnerable in a disaster. Inadequate social interaction and communication during the preceding days means they often lack crucial awareness of the situation and are unprepared for its consequences. They tend to be invisible during emergency evacuations and registration procedures. This can generate more complications for themselves and their impairment.

Preparedness is therefore imperative when it comes to reducing risks and losses during a disaster. It is significantly concerned with effects arising from disaster, because it constitutes the actual circumstances, events and problems against which preparation need to be made.

Social structures, public health and general health services are often disorganized during disasters and, consequently, the population usually has difficult or limited access to services. This increases the potential causes of disability, as minor impairments are not identified and limited or no measures are taken to break the disability cycle. For example, pregnant women miss checkups and people with chronic health problems do not have access to appropriate medical services. Therefore, including disability issues in disaster preparations through appropriate measures will help to prevent possible impairment and disability.

Some PWDs have special needs that must be addressed in addition to the usual needs of all individuals. For example, it might be difficult for people with physical impairments to keep themselves warm due to lack of movements and poor circulation. This situation demands the needs for warm clothing, blankets or firewood. In addition, people with difficulty in moving may also need assistance for evacuating from an unsafe situation, accessing relief shelters and using latrines. Physical assistance, assistive device or installation of ramps may be necessary to ensure these persons are not disadvantaged or trapped in a dangerous situation.

People with visual or hearing impairments are unlikely to notice warning signals and quick evacuation routes during a disaster situation. Subsequently there should be a separate alarm system along with personnel support to move them to safer place. Some PWDs may find it difficult to understand and appropriately react to instruction for these persons, it is important to provide relevant information in a manner which

they can understand such as using simple language or pictures, or speaking very slowly and clearly.

Handicap International experience:

Handicap International's experience in the field of disaster management show clearly that PWDs face additional barriers in accessing emergency support as well as disaster risk reduction activities. In an addition, there is greater risk of becoming disabled. A person's level of disability increasing in disaster affected communities.

The following list highlights some factors, which may make PWDs more vulnerable during an emergency situation:

- PWDs **tend to be invisible** during emergency registration systems;
- PWDs often lack awareness of the situation and cannot comprehend the expected consequences of a disaster;
- The situation can often be misinterpreted through communication difficulties;
- PWDs are often **excluded** from disaster response efforts and particularly affected by changes in terrain resulting from disaster;
- PWDs are often unable to access rescue and evacuation services including adequate shelter, water and sanitation;
- **The emotional distress and trauma** caused by a crisis situation often has longer-term consequences for PWDs.

Disaster risk reduction and persons with disabilities:

In January 2005, over 4000 representatives of governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academic institutes and the private sector gathered in Kobe, Japan, at the second World Conference on Disaster Reduction (WCDR) and concluded negotiations on the Hygo Framework for Action 2005-2015: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters (HFA). The Framework for Action, adopted by 168 states, sets a clear expected outcome- the substantial reduction of disaster losses, in lives as well as the social, economic and environmental assets of communities and countries- and lays out a detailed set of priorities to achieve this by 2015.

The HFA emphasizes that disaster risk reduction is a central issue for development policies, in addition to being of interest to various sciences, humanitarian and environmental fields. Disasters undermine development achievements,

impoverishing people and nations. Without serious efforts to address disaster losses, disaster will become an increasingly serious obstacle to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

To help attain the expected outcome, the HFA identifies five specific Priorities of Action:

1. Making disaster risk reduction a priority.
2. Improving risk information and early warning.
3. Building a culture of safety and resilience
4. Reducing the risks in key sectors.
5. Strengthening preparedness for response.

In respect of Hyogo Framework of Action and Millennium Development Goals different disaster risk reduction activities can assist people with and without disabilities when the event actually occurs:

Improving risk information and early warning: Early warning provides a very important link between preparedness measures and response action, which in turn reduce the risk of exposure and injury of community members. A comprehensive early warning system is very important in any community, even more so in a community with PWDs as they are frequently overlooked in disaster situations. An early warning system is effective only if all community members are reached by it. Therefore, inclusion of PWDs while designing warning signals/signs will help ensure methods are appropriate to meet their needs.

Development of early warning systems in a disabled – friendly manner using multi-model warning means (Visual signs or signals, auditory alarms, peer support, community support etc.)

Type of Impairments and Warning System

Types of Impairments/Disabilities	Warning System
Visual Impairment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Auditory signal system / alarms - Announcements - Posters written with large characters and colour contrast

Hearing Impairment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Visual signal systems – red flag, symbols - Pictures - Turn lights off – on frequently
Intellectual Impairment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Special signals – red flag, symbols - Clear and brief announcements by rescue workers
Physical Impairment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Auditory signals system/alarms - Announcements

Inclusion of PWDs in emergency responses: Mainstreaming PWDs into disaster response systems aims to ensure PWD concerns are addressed at every stakeholder level. In the same way as gender is considered a cross-cutting issue in nearly all development projects, PWDs need to be included at all stages of an intervention.

Reponses measures begin immediately after a disaster, usually with a rapid assessment of the entire context to determine damage and the needs of the community in question, including those of PWDs. With respect to PWDs, the following should be considered during a rapid assessment:

- If there are no databases or lists of PWDs available immediately after a disaster, it is important to ensure PWDs are included in the post-event needs assessment. If a list does exist, it may need to be updated following the disaster as population resettlements and other disaster consequences could change some of the details;
- The specific needs of PWDs should then be quickly determined. Things like special food requirements, specific medicines, urinary bags and special mattresses¹ may be required. It will be important to ensure needs are met, particularly if without them, the person’s health will deteriorate or mobility impaired (thus leading to exclusion).

Contingency planning: Contingency plans are usually prepared by stakeholders involved in disaster management to ensure a rapid and accurate response to any emergency situation. It is important when preparing a contingency plan to consider

¹Special food like milk and other liquid foods. Special medicine like NSAID and cushion.

disability as a crosscutting issue and to account for the special needs of PWDs in the plan.

Hazards analysis and Mapping: During disaster preparedness, a risk assessment is imperative to identify potential areas vulnerable to disaster situations like floods or earthquakes. By involving PWDs in the risk mapping process, they can help to determine possible barriers they may face, should any of these risks become a reality. For example, a person who has difficulty walking or seeing may not be able to negotiate over rubble to reach relief shelter following an earthquake.

Also, when resource mapping is carried out, resources specific to PWDs should also be identified. These may include: accessible drinking water and sanitation sources, accessible shelters and volunteers to provide physical support, rehabilitation centres, and healthcare and hospital services for injured persons, special schools or schools that will include children with disabilities.

In **summary**, disaster preparations need to:

- Address the specific needs of PWDs during risk and resource mapping;
- Prepare the resource inventory taking into consideration three areas of disability: physical, sensory (hearing speech, vision) and intellectual;
- Involve the full participation of PWDs at every stage.

Conclusion: Disaster risk reduction mainstreaming persons with disabilities process is leverage for creating demand and interest from every stakeholder. Thus, including disability in disaster risk reduction can be considered as a starting point towards further sustainable development for persons with disabilities in their community. The cross cutting approach is supposed to generate important change in the mentality and behaviour of everyone so that considering disability issue will not be any more an exception in society activities but will become progressively a natural reflex at community, regional, national and international levels. This is a fundamental right for the persons with disabilities to reach equal and full participation in the society.