

# Disabilities and disasters

More than one billion people – or approximately 15 per cent of the world’s population – live with some form of disability and this group is exceptionally vulnerable in times of disaster. **Robert Uwen** looks at improving resilience for persons with disabilities in Africa

**A**frica is a dynamic continent in a period of rapid transformation, characterised by changes in economy, society and the environment. Yet it is a region that will be affected by climate change, which could limit food and water availability and might lead to forced migrations and unintended risk burdens for the disabled.

In the words of Margareta Wahlström, Social Representative of the Director General for Disaster Risk Reduction: “What our experience has shown us is that the presence of disability amplifies the impact of the disaster on a person’s life and reduces the range of strategies to cope with them.” It is true that persons with disabilities are often invisible to social services and unable to reach food, water and security assistance, owing to immobility.

In Africa, poverty is rampant and is both a cause and consequence of disability. Poverty and disability reinforce each other, contributing to increased vulnerability and exclusion. The majority of people with disabilities find their situation affects their chances of going to school, working for a living, enjoying family life, and participating as equals in social life. In turn, disability exacerbates poverty, by increasing isolation and economic strain, not just for the individual, but often for the affected family as well.

Several best practice initiatives exist to tackle the problem. These include programmes to combat leprosy and river blindness, improvements to maternal and child health, and support for family planning services.

In 1988 the international community set itself the goal of eradicating polio by the year 2000. This objective was enshrined in the Global Polio Eradication Declaration, made at the World Health Assembly. In the year the declaration was made, there were an estimated 350,000 cases of the disease around the world. By 1999 this had been reduced to just 5,000. The UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) has been a major player in this field.

Other best practices include several initiatives from the United Nations International Strategy



*The author addressing young people, some of whom are living with albinism, during the rally march to mark the 2013 International Day for Disaster Reduction in Abuja, Nigeria*

for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR), such as the Bi-annual Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction. In recent times, UNISDR has proposed a successor framework to the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA), the post-2015 HFA, which we hope will highlight the intricate linkages between local governance, wars and violence and disability on disaster risk reduction (DRR). Civil society initiatives such as ‘Views from the Frontline’ – a flagship of the UK based Global Network for Disaster Reduction, have been very successful in giving a voice to the poor. National focal points on emergencies, such as the National Emergency Management Agency of Nigeria, have initiated partnerships with civil society, the private sector and

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academia, a bold step, which will no doubt secure risk reduction dividends to the people.

Good policy is an important starting point, and productive policy dialogue in Africa could be undertaken, for example, between governments and development agencies in the context of sector programme development, with a view to ensuring that appropriate legal and policy frameworks for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in employment, social services provision and education are developed.

The international community responds to natural and man-made disasters with financial, material and technical assistance. This is intended not only to save lives during emergencies, but also to help build capacity to prevent and avoid future disasters.

### Negative stereotypes

A broader-based approach, which requires a wider understanding both of the contexts in which emergencies arise, and also of the impact and consequences of different ways of dealing with them, is necessary. Wider stakeholder participation, including a more direct involvement of people with disabilities, is a key to developing this understanding.

Increasingly, media and communications are

being used to draw attention to disability issues. Television, radio, the press, networking and lobbying can play an active role in challenging negative stereotypes, pressing for equal rights and raising awareness of disability.

Gaps in knowledge must be addressed.

specific areas requiring greater attention.

As with other areas of development, the availability of adequate data for policy making, planning and measuring progress is a challenge in work related to disability. National governments and the international community

## The UN's 2013 International Day for Disaster Reduction in October focused on living with disabilities and disasters, and December 3 marked the International Day of Persons with Disabilities

Most research into disability tends to focus predominantly on health or social welfare aspects. There is little co-ordination between research on disability and research on associated issues in gender, social development and human sciences. Specific attention needs to be given to both quantitative and participatory components in research methods to ensure that the different dimensions of disability are appreciated. Research on monitoring and evaluation methods on topics such as violence against women with disabilities, and the sexual exploitation of children with disabilities, are examples of

need to resource statistical and other monitoring systems, adequately and make use of available information, to obtain more effective means of identifying and replicating good practice.

We therefore have several recommendations, the first being to include qualified people with disabilities in governance through a 10 per cent mandatory quota in all appointments and employment. People with disabilities should be empowered to take control of personal emergency preparedness for themselves and their families, and there should be a focus on prevention and mitigation strategies to reduce adverse impacts of climate change.

Strategic alliances need to be built between people with disabilities, experts on inclusive disaster preparedness and mainstream DRR, including the UN and other international interagency initiatives. It would also be useful to develop pilot projects to demonstrate the feasibility of inclusive disaster management solutions and to promote disability as a cross-cutting issue affecting all groups and sectors.

Furthermore, accessible food and water distribution centres must be built. DRR reduction methodologies and tools for scaling-up purposes, in particular those for risk assessment and monitoring and early warning systems, must be accessible and inclusive. Inclusion should be integrated as a requirement in international development donor funded programmes. Lastly, representative groups contributing to UN negotiating processes should be identified, and include persons with disabilities. CRJ

### Author

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