



## 5. Why the focus on persons with disabilities in disasters?



Onel runs an organisation in his community that advocates for the rights of persons with disabilities. He is pictured at home in Camp Perrin, Haiti, after the earthquake of August 2021. © CBM/Nadia Todres

It is not hard to envisage why persons with disabilities deserve special attention when it comes to disasters. Indeed, many of the factors and processes that put them in a situation of vulnerability in the first place, be they extreme poverty, inequality or fragmented access to health care, mean they are weakly positioned in a crisis. For example, the fact that they tend to be poorer, means they are more likely to live in poorer housing in areas exposed to natural hazards, for example those prone to landslides.

### Some points to remember here:

- Persons with disabilities are two to four times more likely to be injured or to die in an emergency situation.
- They are at greater risk of seeing their impairments worsen or developing secondary ones.
- They struggle to flee in a crisis situation, are often among the last to be evacuated, and may even be left behind.
- Early warning systems meant to inform people are often inaccessible to persons with disabilities, some more than others, for example persons with visual disabilities.
- Evacuation routes are often not designed with persons with disabilities in mind and are inaccessible.
- Discrimination and stigma, even within families and communities, dramatically enhance vulnerability.
- Those working in disaster risk management often lack disability knowledge, including where persons with disabilities are located and how to address their needs in a crisis. As a result, they are often excluded right from disaster risk planning, resulting in systems that are not responsive to their needs.
- Overall, hazards seriously affect persons with disabilities in a range of areas, including food, access to water and sanitation, health care and rehabilitation, medication, housing and livelihoods among others.
- Persons with disabilities are among those who struggle most to recover from a disaster event, meaning a greater need for effective disaster risk reduction so they are not impacted in the first place.
- Even when disaster risk management is aware of the needs of persons with disabilities, response often falls short of providing adequate assistance especially in the initial 'chaotic' phase when a disaster strikes.
- Overall, community support systems often collapse or are fragmented in times of crises.

The table below provides some examples of how and why persons with disabilities are increasingly exposed and vulnerable to disasters, and the dramatic impacts on them. A disability focus is therefore inevitable within community development.

<b>THE DISABILITY/DISASTER NEXUS IN FOCUS</b>		
<b>Problem area</b>	<b>Impacts on persons with disabilities (examples)</b>	<b>Include your own observations in your context</b>
<p><b>Climate change and slow onset disasters</b> e.g. drought, deforestation, rising sea levels</p>	<p>Less food output meets higher food prices, but persons with disabilities are generally poorer and face higher costs (e.g. healthcare) and cannot afford the increased prices.</p> <p>Increased time and strain, walking long distances in search of food and water. This is a serious constraint for persons with physical disabilities, some more than others. It also means dependence on family.</p> <p>Reduced food consumption exacerbates health problems and secondary impairments. This is a particularly serious concern among poorer persons with disabilities already struggling to cover food costs as well as those of medication and health care.</p> <p>Less access to livelihood opportunities impacts assets, including financial ones. This is an added strain for persons with disabilities whose livelihoods are often fragmented, characterised by unemployment and underemployment. This enhances the spiral of poverty, ill-health and inequality.</p>	



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<p><b>Climate change and slow onset disasters</b> e.g. drought, deforestation, rising sea levels</p>	<p>Greater amounts of household income spent on food, reduces assets available to access health care, with serious health repercussions.</p> <p>Loss of arable land means movement of people in search of more fertile places and opportunities. Persons with disabilities are likely to be among those left behind or who struggle in displacement.</p> <p>Food scarcity and migration may often lead to conflict. Persons with disabilities are among those trapped in volatile areas, unable to flee.</p> <p>Food scarcity is often associated with malnutrition which in turn increases the risk of aggravating health conditions. These can lead to new impairments or worsen existing ones.</p>	
<p><b>Inaccessible early warning systems</b></p>	<p>Early warning systems are often not designed with persons with disabilities in mind and are frequently inaccessible to people with visual impairments and deaf people among others. This means that they are less likely to receive warnings on time, meaning they may become trapped or struggle to evacuate on time.</p> <p>There may also be few to no arrangements to ensure that warnings reach those in more isolated and remote areas. This may be bound to an absence of mapping of persons with disabilities in their respective communities.</p>	



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<b>Inaccessible early warning systems</b>	Even if warnings reach persons with disabilities, they may not know how to react because they may be excluded from community-based awareness raising and capacity building activities (for example those provided by disaster management authorities). If these activities are available, they may also not be in accessible formats.	
<b>Evacuation and response barriers</b>	<p>Persons with disabilities may be forgotten or abandoned during a crisis or may be evacuated late.</p> <p>Evacuation routes are often inaccessible.</p> <p>People with physical impairments may be limited in mobility without assistance, including in shelters or transport for evacuation.</p> <p>Evacuation personnel may not know to support persons with disabilities.</p> <p>Shelters too may be inaccessible, lack health care, assistive devices and specialised medication required by persons with disabilities.</p>	
<b>Poverty</b>	Low levels of financial assets and savings, fragmented livelihoods, poor housing in exposed areas and no social protection mean that persons with disabilities are disproportionately vulnerable in the face of shocks, be they crop failure or floods.	



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<b>Poverty</b>	<p>Women, those from racial and ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples suffer the brunt of inequitable access to markets, information and services as these barriers meet social and cultural dimensions.</p> <p>Poverty reduces individual opportunities to overcome a hazard-prone situation (e.g. individual adaptations to houses, storage of food etc.), intensifying further the level of vulnerability of individuals, families and communities.</p>	
<b>Negative attitudes and exclusion from decision making and participation</b>	<p>Persons with disabilities may be among the most marginalised and excluded. They encounter negative attitudes and responses that disable and oppress.</p> <p>They are rarely included in discussions and measures on disaster risk reduction and underrepresented with decision makers.</p> <p>Their voices and concerns are excluded, reinforcing the marginalisation from strategies, plans and measures designed to save lives in crises.</p>	