Including Persons with Disabilities in Disaster Risk Reduction in Africa

Overview

Persons with disabilities are often disproportionately affected by natural hazards, climate-induced disasters and global health emergencies such as the COVID-19 (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction [UNDRR], 2023). They face heightened protection risks and barriers to inclusion (United Nations, 2019; Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, and International Disability Alliance, 2021).

The commitments to disability inclusion in the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are firmly rooted in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, including article 11, which addresses the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies. The ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities obliges Member States to ensure that disability inclusion is a legal requirement. This extends to the full inclusion of persons with disabilities in the prevention of disasters and the reduction of disaster risk (United Nations, 2006).

In 2022, the total population of Sub-Saharan Africa exceeded 1.2 billion (World Bank, 2022). Although official government statistics from Africa indicate varying disability prevalence percentages, ranging as low as 2 per cent up to 16 per cent when applying the World Health Organization's global disability prevalence, in certain countries these figures could be significantly owing to factors such as conflict, forced displacement and limited access to adequate medical services (Gupta and others, 2021). Largely because of the preexisting lack of equal protections and rights, women tend to experience higher rates of disability than men (World Bank, 2021). While data is crucial for understanding and addressing the disaster risks faced by persons with disabilities, it is often lacking where needed most; leaving the extent of the impact of disasters on persons with disabilities poorly understood in many African countries.

In 2023, UNDRR conducted a study on disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction (DiDRR) policies and practices in Africa. This study aimed to provide an account of the progress, existing gaps and promising practices in including persons with disabilities in disaster risk reduction (DRR) in the region. It drew on data from the 2023 Global Survey on Persons with Disabilities and Disasters report (UNDRR, 2023), and included insights from stakeholder consultations conducted in Cameroon, Ethiopia, Kenya and Togo. Additionally, the study incorporated findings from related research on Including Persons with Disabilities in Disaster Risk Reduction from Eight Countries of Africa, Asia and South/Central America,1 which included analysis from Niger, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

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The study design, data collection and analysis were based on the key inclusion criteria aligning closely with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030.\(^2\),\(^3\)

This issue brief presents the key findings of the UNDRR study and proposes a series of recommendations for Member States and other stakeholders aimed at strengthening the resilience of persons with disabilities across Africa. These recommendations are derived from both the extensive desk review and the insights shared by the study participants.

1. Understanding disaster risk

In Africa there is an emerging trend in the adoption of a rights-based approach to disability. Yet, persons with disabilities are continuously perceived as “vulnerable groups” rather than as active stakeholders in DRR.

This is largely because of the prevalent, although diminishing, stigma around disability, which not only undermines the potential contributions of persons with disabilities but also reinforces existing barriers, limiting their participation.

A critical factor worsening this issue is the lack of consideration for intersectionality and understanding of key drivers of risk and vulnerability (i.e. how persons with disabilities who have diverse identity characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, poverty, etc. are often more excluded and at a greater risk). These elements are essential for developing effective and inclusive DRR strategies, yet they remain overlooked. This is compounded by the limited practical knowledge and capacity for integrating disability inclusion among DRR practitioners, particularly at the local level.

The gap in expertise and understanding significantly hinders the development and implementation of disability-inclusive disaster risk management plans and policies.

Moreover, the participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in DRR is often hindered by a lack of awareness of their rights and insufficient information about the available mechanisms and processes related to DRR. This situation compromises their ability to effectively contribute and limits their access to vital resources and support in times of disaster.

The study also found some progress in terms of disaggregated data collection. The adoption of a functioning approach and internationally agreed tools, such as the Washington Group Short Set of questions,\(^4\) in national population censuses and surveys marks a step forward in understanding the needs and capacities of persons with disabilities. However, the collection of reliable disability data is still hampered by numerous challenges, including cultural stigma, resource limitations, capacity issues and the lack of involvement of persons with disabilities and organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) in the data-collection process.

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\(^2\) Conducted in English and French, the study encompassed a desk review of existing literature related to disability, climate change and disasters in the context of Africa produced between 2015 and 2023. Data collection and analysis occurred from July to September 2023. It engaged 58 stakeholders, including 18 persons with disabilities and their representative organizations (OPDs), governments, national and international NGOs, United Nations agencies, and donors, through 31 key informant interviews and six focus group discussions. Moreover, 103 country-specific and regional documents were screened, with 70 subjected to an in-depth review.

\(^3\) The following key inclusion criteria were applied for reviewing progress in disability-inclusive DRR across Africa: (1) Understanding disaster risk: disaggregated data; inclusive risk assessments and planning; (2) Strengthening disaster risk governance to manage disaster risk: direct representation of persons with disabilities in DRR mechanisms; meaningful participation and leadership of persons with disabilities; inclusive partnerships; (3) Investing in DRR for resilience: investments in disability-inclusive DRR; protection and special arrangements; (4) Enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response and to build back better in recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction: disaster preparedness and capacity for effective response and recovery; inclusive risk communication, early warning and early action.

Mainstreaming disability inclusion in disaster risk reduction: promising practices from Cameroon

Efforts are emerging in Cameroon to mainstream disability inclusion into Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) initiatives. In regions like Bénoué and Mayo-Rey, disability has become an integral part of risk maps and DRR plans. This positive development followed a workshop organized by the Ministry of Social Affairs.

Cameroon’s Directorate for Civil Protection collaborates with international NGOs to address disability inclusion. An example of this collaboration can be seen in Garoua, where the NGO Christian Blind Mission, along with teams from the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization and the Directorate for Civil Protection, is working on updating departmental emergency response organization plans (ORSEC plans) for the Bénoué and Mayo-Rey departments, integrating disability considerations. This marks a milestone, as it represents the first instance in Cameroon where ORSEC plans are being designed to address disability-related issues.

Enhancing disability inclusion through data and inclusive partnerships in Togo

In Togo, the Federation of Togolese Associations of Persons with Disabilities (FETAPH) and German Agency for International Cooperation have a project aimed at collecting localized data on persons with disabilities in specific regions. The data-collection efforts prioritize inclusivity, taking into account various identity factors such as gender, age, socioeconomic conditions and more. In times of disasters, stakeholders, including civil society organizations and government agencies such as the National Civil Protection Agency (ANPC), can collaborate with FETAPH or the National Statistics Institute to access this valuable data.

Since 2018, FETAPH has also actively engaged in capacity-building and advocacy initiatives. In partnership with ANPC, they conduct training sessions focusing on disability inclusion. Their primary objective is to sensitize key stakeholders to the specific requirements of persons with disabilities, particularly in the context of disasters. Collaborative endeavours between FETAPH, the Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Security and ANPC have yielded improvements in building accessibility for persons with disabilities. This underscores the critical importance of considering disability inclusion in the development and implementation of policies. Further, certain municipalities have developed Communal Development Plans, with FETAPH encouraging its member associations to play an active role in these processes. This is essential since Communal Development Plans encompass various aspects, including environmental, waste management and risk disaster management, all of which must account for disability-specific requirements. For example, owing to FETAPH’s involvement, the Communal Development Plan of Zio now includes provisions related to assistive devices and other considerations tailored to persons with disabilities.
OPDs are not involved in data collection. This creates a significant gap in disability-related information. Without their insights, data may be inadequate or inaccurate, failing to capture the requirements of people with disabilities.

– Local OPD representative

Further, disability data for risk assessments and planning is underutilized because of coordination challenges and siloed approaches to data collection and exchange.

The lack of data on persons with disabilities currently living in refugee camps and internal displacement sites has also led to challenges in inclusive preparedness planning for refugees and internally displaced persons with disabilities.

The availability and reliability of data related to disability-inclusive DRR are major challenges. Inconsistencies and limitations in data collection and reporting hinder the ability to accurately assess and address disability inclusion in national DRR efforts.

– International NGO representative

We are not considered or involved. Neighbourhood chiefs and committees forget about us at meetings and so on, just because we are disabled people.

– A refugee with disabilities

Inclusive data and advocacy for disaster risk reduction in Uganda

Uganda has made strides in integrating the Washington Group Questions into its national statistical system for collecting disability data. Concurrently, a promising practice has emerged in leveraging disaggregated data to support risk reduction and preparedness planning. District Disaster Management Committees collaborate with OPDs in certain areas to collect local-level data. Notably, in hazard-prone sub-counties, data on persons with disabilities is used to develop accessible early warning systems considering their specific requirements. However, this approach is most prevalent in districts where the National Union of Disabled Persons of Uganda (NUDIPU) is highly active.

OPDs have been strong advocates for promoting disability inclusion in Uganda’s DRR programmes. NUDIPU’s efforts have resulted in increased representation of persons with disabilities on the inter-agency National Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction, as well as on District Disaster Management Committees in the Bududa, Kasese and Isingiro districts.

Moreover, NUDIPU has played a significant role in contributing to the formulation of the legal framework on disaster management and climate change adaptation through its active engagement in the process.

At the local level, NUDIPU mobilizes persons with disabilities to educate them about their rights, support them in becoming effective advocates for their rights, facilitate access to basic services, and enable them to meaningfully participate in decision-making processes affecting their lives, including DRR.
2. Strengthening disaster risk governance to manage disaster risk

Their reality combines disaster, climate change and conflict. African OPDs take a holistic approach to disaster risk reduction and expect it to be reflected in DRR efforts.

– International OPD representative

Enhanced awareness of and political commitment to disability inclusion have led to the integration of disability considerations into DRR policies and strategic frameworks across Africa. This progress reflects a growing recognition of the importance of including disability perspectives in DRR.

However, challenges remain in translating these policy commitments into practice, particularly because of resource constraints and competing priorities, which are often worsened by protracted humanitarian crises.

In 2023, only 20% of survey respondents with disabilities from Africa were aware of the DRR plans at the national level compared with 24% in 2013. Similarly, only 22% were aware of DRR plans at the subnational level in 2023, compared with 19% in 2013 (UNDRR, 2023).

Only 9% of survey respondents with disabilities from Africa reported that local DRR plans considered the specific requirements of persons with disabilities.

Advancing disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction in Ethiopia

Ethiopia has made considerable progress in DiDRR and management. The Government has established technical disaster risk management working groups at the national, regional and local levels, involving persons with disabilities in decision-making and implementation, with a focus on early warning systems, emergency response and recovery efforts. This approach ensures diverse perspectives contribute to comprehensive disaster preparedness and response planning.

Key partners, including the United Nations Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the United Nations Children’s Fund and various national and international organizations such as the Light for the World, actively promote disability inclusion in DRR. Capacity-building programmes empower persons with disabilities, communities and stakeholders, ensuring their perspectives are considered in all stages of disaster risk management.

For instance, the Gayo Pastoral Development Initiative in the Moyale and Borena areas effectively mobilizes the community for disability-inclusive DRR. These efforts enhance the well-being and inclusion of persons with disabilities, resulting in a substantial increase in their resilience, especially during disasters. These examples highlight the positive outcomes of prioritizing disability inclusion in DRR.
Including Persons with Disabilities in Disaster Risk Reduction in Africa

Multiple study respondents emphasized the necessity for developing technical guidelines for the adoption of DiDRR at the national level, offering a road map for integrating disability considerations into DRR strategies and action plans effectively.

Additionally, there has been an increase in engagement and consultations with persons with disabilities as part of national, regional and global DRR platforms, and there is a notable interest among persons with disabilities in participating in DRR policymaking and practice.

However, capacity constraints and limited resources, compounded by the absence of accessible mechanisms for participation – including physical, communication, attitudinal and institutional barriers – continue to impede the full and effective participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations.

Participation of people with disabilities is minimal due to capacity limitations, limited opportunities for involvement, inadequate education, lack of awareness about emerging issues, and discrimination.

Urban populations tend to participate due to increased exposure.

— Local OPD representative

91% of survey respondents with disabilities from Africa expressed their willingness to participate, marking the highest percentage among all regions.

70% of respondents reported an absence of mechanisms for participation in community-based DRR processes.

80% of survey respondents with disabilities from Africa reported not participating in community-based DRR decision-making.

Partnerships between OPDs and other DRR stakeholders are often unequal and inadequate. OPDs frequently find themselves engaged late in the process, funded indirectly and limited to roles in project implementation and event planning. This situation underscores the need for more equitable and direct involvement of OPDs in DRR, ensuring that their contributions are valued, and that they are engaged as equal partners from the outset of DRR initiatives.
3. Investing in disaster risk reduction for resilience

Despite positive trends in prioritizing disability inclusion, there is insufficient investment by governments, national and international NGOs, and donors in this area. This lack of financial commitment hinders the progress of DiDRR efforts in the region. Limited financial, human and technical resources further exacerbate the challenges faced in advancing the disability inclusion agenda. Without adequate resources, it becomes difficult to implement comprehensive and sustainable disability-inclusive strategies and initiatives.

One persistent misconception is that persons with disabilities constitute an insignificant percentage of the population and therefore do not warrant significant attention. This error can lead to a lack of funding allocation for disability inclusion and the prioritization of other issues. This perspective overlooks the vital importance of inclusive disaster preparedness and response for all individuals, including those with disabilities.

The study also revealed that DiDRR initiatives, primarily led by national and international NGOs, tend to be reactive and project-based, lacking sustainability and institutionalization. This approach limits the long-term impact and effectiveness of these interventions.

While donors increasingly prioritize inclusiveness, aligning with the Sendai Framework and the 2030 Agenda, there is a notable lack of funding for OPDs. This gap in funding undermines the capacity of OPDs to actively engage in and contribute to DiDRR efforts.

Physical barriers, such as inaccessible infrastructure and a lack of reasonable accommodation, hinder participation and pose safety concerns in disasters. Overcoming these barriers is pivotal to facilitating the active involvement of persons with disabilities in disaster preparedness and resilience-building efforts. Additionally, the lack of investment in rehabilitation and assistive devices further limits participation and preparedness among individuals with disabilities.

OPDs have not yet been capacitated with relevant knowledge and skills to be able to meaningfully participate and contribute to DRR policy and practice. OPDs lack capacity, and more so, resources are a challenge towards contributing to DRR efforts.

"Local OPD representative

Credit to UNDP/OCHA/Manuel Delgado

A girl with a pen and paper among other children, who looks concentrated in Ghana.
A shortage of essential assistive devices hinders engagement of people with disabilities in DRR activities, limiting their participation and resilience in disaster preparedness, response and recovery.

– International NGO representative

The study highlights the Making Cities Resilient initiative as an example of inclusive approaches. This partnership spans DRR, settlement development and other sectors. It exemplifies inclusion through participatory planning and inclusive settlement design, serving as a model for how collaboration and a focus on accessibility can enhance disaster resilience efforts in communities.

4. Enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response and to build back better

The provision of accessible risk information is a critical aspect of disaster preparedness and response. However, there are significant challenges that need to be addressed in this regard.

Only 24% of survey respondents with disabilities from Africa who require assistance for evacuation have a plan for someone to assist them. 60% reported sometimes having someone to assist them, while 16% would be unable to evacuate in the event of a disaster because of a lack of access to assisted evacuation.

One notable issue is the limited outreach and inaccessible communication during disaster warnings, with deaf communities being particularly underserved. This gap in communication can lead to increased vulnerability and difficulty for individuals with hearing difficulties in taking timely action in case of a disaster.

We discuss disaster risks and practical measures with community members, but often overlook the need for sign language interpreters or translation for those who are hard of hearing. Our presentations are geared towards the general population.

– National disaster management authority representative

89% of survey respondents with disabilities from Africa did not have a personal preparedness plan for disasters.

5 See https://mcr2030.undrr.org/where-we-work/africa.
Only 25% of survey respondents with disabilities from Africa reported dissemination of risk information in accessible formats.

Language differences pose an additional challenge, necessitating translations into English, French, Portuguese, various local languages and African sign languages to ensure that risk information and communication are accessible to a diverse population. Such a situation is also evident for persons with disabilities who currently live in camps and internal displacement sites across the African region, exacerbating their complex vulnerabilities in preparing for future disasters (Christian Blind Mission, 2023).

The information available in the sites/camps is not accessible and adapted (no sign language interpretation, audio description, for example) in such a way as to facilitate the participation of people with disabilities in consultations and decision-making; we are forgotten every time.

— An internally displaced person with disabilities

Despite these challenges, there are some local solutions and community-driven initiatives that have emerged to address the issue of accessible early warning systems. These efforts, however, remain limited in scope and need further support and expansion to reach a wider audience.

Kenya’s efforts towards disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction

Droughts and floods pose the highest risk to Kenya and are worsened by inequality. Through its National Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction, Kenya is developing inclusive and accessible DRR interventions. In Kisumu County, Kenya, over 200 representatives from government, academia and civil society gathered for the ninth DRR National Symposium. The county government of Kisumu has a disability adviser and has created DRR committees. Persons with disabilities take active part in these committees in every sub-county.

A man is communicating in sign language at the Kenya DRR Symposium.
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The early stages of the United Nations Early Warnings For All (EW4All) initiative have highlighted the need for improved outreach and communication in disability inclusion efforts.6 Addressing the gaps in accessible communication and outreach during disaster warnings is a crucial step in enhancing the resilience and safety of communities, especially those most at risk of being disproportionately impacted by disasters.

Enhancing disaster resilience through inclusive early warning systems

Early warning systems are essential for DRR, saving lives and minimizing socioeconomic impacts. Effective systems must actively involve at-risk communities, raise public awareness, disseminate warnings efficiently and maintain constant preparedness.

The EW4All initiative, led by the World Meteorological Organization, UNDRR, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the International Telecommunication Union, provides a valuable opportunity to deliver timely and accessible early warning information to African communities, including persons with disabilities.

A key activity in this initiative involves gap analysis to identify strengths and weaknesses in existing early warning systems, forming the foundation for national road maps to strengthen early warning and early action systems.

To facilitate country-level gap analysis, the EW4All initiative has developed the Minimum Core Capability Checklist, which incorporates disability across various pillars. For instance, in assessing coordination between relevant agencies and stakeholders, it examines whether the representatives from key communities (e.g., women, persons with disabilities, youth, rural communities) are actively engaged in early warning system development and decision-making, as indicated in the cross-pillar sheet.

As the EW4All initiative enters its active implementation phase, utilizing this gap analysis can enhance disability inclusion within early warning systems, thereby creating more inclusive, accessible and effective systems that benefit the entire community and bolster community resilience.

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Local solutions for effective early warning

Local solutions play a pivotal role in ensuring that early warning systems are both inclusive and accessible to everyone within a community, including individuals with diverse disabilities.

In Kenya, disaster risk information is shared through OPDs to reach communities. In certain counties, OPDs actively engage in raising awareness among families, particularly those with members with disabilities. These efforts are geared towards reducing stigma and fostering discussions about the roles of persons with disabilities in DRR. Communities have also developed innovative solutions to facilitate early warning actions for persons with disabilities, such as conducting audits of existing county systems to identify areas requiring adjustments and involving community health promoters and local leaders in disseminating early warning information. While these efforts may primarily focus on early warning for conflicts, they can be effectively adapted to address early warning for natural hazards and climate-induced disasters as well.

In Cameroon, OPDs have established WhatsApp groups for real-time information sharing during disasters. For individuals without smartphones, information is relayed via phone calls or messages to notify people of potential hazards in specific areas. Further, radio stations broadcasting warnings in local languages are employed to alert the population.

In Togo, newsletters are produced and made available in both paper and digital formats, in addition to being shared on various social media platforms. Alert messages are disseminated to communities in multiple languages by Togolese Red Cross volunteers. Beacons and whistles are also utilized for general alert purposes.

In Uganda, a diverse range of dissemination methods are employed, including radio (both national and local), email, television, print media, Internet websites, telephone, regional and national workshops, and SMS alerts. Notably, the most preferred and trusted source of risk communication for persons with disabilities includes religious and community leaders.
Recommendations

The findings highlight the need for a comprehensive and inclusive approach to DiDRR in Africa. While there have been positive developments in policy commitments and awareness, there are significant gaps in translating these into practical, sustainable and inclusive actions. Bridging these gaps requires concerted efforts, including overcoming stigma, improving data collection and utilization, enhancing participation and securing adequate investment in disability inclusion.

The following recommendations are provided to expedite the progress towards fulfilling the Sendai Framework commitments to disability inclusion and to build more resilient and inclusive communities that leave no one behind in the face of disasters in Africa. These recommendations also relate to the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement on climate change commitments and goals, as well as the legal obligations of States under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

1. **Adopt a multidimensional approach** to addressing underlying risk factors and key drivers of vulnerability among persons with disabilities. **Collect data disaggregated** at minimum by sex, age and disability. Utilize an approach for disability data collection that follows internationally agreed tools such as the Washington Group Short Set of questions. When promoting comprehensive strategies to mitigate disaster risk, consider the intersection of diverse identity factors, including gender, age, disability, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, displacement and more.

2. **Take into account the complex sociocultural and humanitarian contexts** when mainstreaming disability inclusion in DRR. Similarly, consider the implications of conflict and disaster in all-inclusive development programmes as a means to introduce DRR and garner the interest of OPDs.

3. **Establish mechanisms for formalizing commitments to DiDRR** through close collaboration between governments, OPDs, national and international NGOs, United Nations agencies, donors and other key DRR stakeholders.

4. **Develop clear guidelines for Member States** to adopt disability-inclusive DRR at the national level.

5. **Ensure systematic resource allocation** to build capacities, institutions and mechanisms for mainstreaming disability inclusion in DRR, while addressing barriers that hinder effective inclusion.

6. **Ensure the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities in DRR** by establishing accessible communication channels, consultation platforms and tailored support to enable their active engagement throughout all phases of disaster risk management.

7. **Address issues related to disability data collection and utilization in DRR**, focusing on reducing cultural stigma, securing adequate resources, building capacity, fostering the active involvement of OPDs and improving coordination among key stakeholders for reliable data collection and exchange.
8. **Make meaningful investments in OPDs at all levels to enhance their capacities.** This may involve initiating with small grants or exploring pooled funding in collaboration with international OPDs, with funds directly accessible to national and local OPDs. This funding should also cover non-project-related costs for capacity-building, separate from project delivery.

9. **Mainstream disability inclusion into all pillars of the EW4All initiative while working closely with persons with disabilities** and their representative organizations at the national, regional and global levels. **Promote local solutions and community-driven initiatives** for accessible early warnings and early action for all.

"Inviting OPDs to meetings isn’t enough; meaningful participation requires empowering them for effective engagement."

– International NGO representative

"I think we’re facing a multifaceted challenge. We need to not only provide training to organizations of persons with disabilities on disaster risk reduction but also strengthen their operational capabilities to manage grants effectively. Operational struggles can complicate collaboration."

– Donor representative

"True inclusion goes beyond words in a policy – it requires thorough implementation planning and sincere partnerships with disability advocates."

– Donor representative

"Continued inclusion of people with disabilities in Disaster Management Committees is essential, especially during disaster preparedness, response and recovery. The challenge is in ensuring information accessibility for all within our existing structures, which are not yet fully inclusive across the DRR spectrum."

– National NGO representative

"National and local disaster plans must involve OPDs in decision-making from the start to address access and functional needs effectively. Prioritizing OPD participation in planning, rather than an afterthought, leads to comprehensive and effective plans, leaving no one behind during crises."

– Local OPD representative
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