Flames of Change: Innovating Heat and Wildfire Governance for Inclusive Communities

Special Report
Report on Disability Inclusion in Disaster Risk Reduction and Prevention

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Introduction

It is important to underline that the human interaction with the environment and the existing barriers, in terms of social or financial inequalities, as well as, physical, built, digital, or attitudinal constrains, play a major role in vulnerability of populations and hence, add the final impact of disasters. Apparently, lack of inclusiveness will cause exacerbation of the consequences in the long term due to chained shocks or stresses, as previously described. Though, a non-inclusive approach, e.g. a non-accessible environment can generally be a drawback, affecting the quality of life and well-being of the general population beyond emergencies or crises situations. To this end, considering human variability and universal design in building disaster resilience strategies is crucial, putting at the fore-front the engagement of persons with disabilities in disaster risk reduction and prevention activities.

In the above context, this report, connected with the MCR2030 “Flames of Chance: Innovating Heat and Wildfire Governance for Inclusive Communities” report strives to focus attention on the following aspects: (a) understanding the issue in relation to ensuring the rights of persons with disabilities; (b) understanding the factors and obstacles that determine the magnitude of the consequences for persons with disabilities in situations of risk and; (c) mapping the International and European frameworks for the protection of the rights of these groups of people, focusing on disaster preparedness and response. A catalogue of policy recommendations will be provided.

General overview

Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in combination with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.-a). In these terms, it is important to state that some disabilities are not immediately apparent. These are known as “Invisible Disabilities”; for example, non-communicable diseases like respiratory impairments, e.g. asthma, allergies, depression, diabetes, brain injuries and schizophrenia are considered as “hidden disabilities” that could increase the vulnerability of people in case of an emergency. An estimated 1.3 billion people – or 16 per cent of the global population worldwide – experience a significant disability today (UNDRR, 2023). In the European Union, around 87 million people have some form of disability (European Commission, n.d.-a) and according to the National Confederation of Persons with Disabilities in Greece (ESAmēa), persons with disabilities are estimated to make up 24.7 per cent of the population older than 16 years old (ESAmēa Disability Issues Observatory, 2018).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD) was adopted on 13 December 2006 at the United Nations Headquarters in New York and entered into force on 3 May 2008 after having been ratified by 20 Member States. It is the first legally binding international instrument setting minimum standards to ensure the rights of persons with disabilities.¹ So far, more than 180 countries have ratified the Convention, including the European Union in 2010, making the European Union the first regional organization to ratify a human rights treaty (European Commission, 2011). In accordance with article 11

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“Situations of risk and humanitarian crises,” States Parties shall, in accordance with their obligations under international law, international humanitarian law and international human rights law, take all necessary measures to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk, including situations of armed conflict; humanitarian emergencies and disasters caused by natural hazards.²

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**Vulnerability drivers affecting the impact of disasters for the persons with disabilities**

In situations of danger, persons with disabilities or chronic diseases and their families have the same rights and basic needs as any other citizen. However, most of the time they are displaced or neglected, facing challenges and difficulties in accessing humanitarian aid, means of livelihood, health and medical care or other services, as well as in accessing information and news updates. They may be deprived of certain legal rights and are often excluded from decision-making processes.

Studies following the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011 showed that mortality rates for people with disabilities were two to four times higher than those of the rest of the population (European Disability Forum, 2022). The COVID-19 outbreak has highlighted not only the intense inequalities and social discrimination experienced by people with disabilities, but also the inadequacy of systems to support them effectively.

The recently released Report of the Midterm Review of the Implementation of the Sendai Framework (MTR) shows that countries are not on track to achieve the Sendai Framework objectives by 2030. The participation of organizations of persons with disabilities in DRR is frequently curtailed by limited resources and support from other DRR stakeholders. Moreover, the perception of persons with disabilities as “vulnerable” rather than as active and contributing stakeholders persists. Though, for explaining “vulnerability” of persons with disabilities it is crucial to identify all the vulnerability drivers when interacting with the environment and to extensively study all the possible mechanisms that activate or preserve vulnerability. For example, the non-horizontal application of the universal design, or the non-accessibility of the built environment intensify the impact of disasters for the persons with disabilities; in case of an emergency evacuation, there is limited self-evacuation capacity and difficulty in reaching safe places by those groups, making them “vulnerable”. The lack of training on how to respond to emergencies under an inclusive approach, engaging persons with disabilities in disaster preparedness exercises is another vulnerability driver.

Since the global community has shifted the focus on DRR rather than on simply responding to disasters, States and their organizations need to include persons with disabilities in their policies, actions, measures and programmes in both planning and implementation. This effectively contributes to reducing inequalities in access to emergency response, and to long-term recovery for both people who had a disability before a disaster and those who became disabled due to a disaster (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.-b).

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While the UNCRPD is the first legally binding instrument to protect the rights of persons with disabilities in all areas of everyday life, the international system has also been strengthened with the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development published in 2015. The 17 Goals are intended to affirm that no one should be left behind. The 2030 Agenda recognizes the importance of empowering people who may experience multiple forms of discrimination, including in crisis situations, and its Goals create implementation commitments for all countries (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Sustainable Development, n.d.).

The Sendai Framework for Action on Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 also came to build commitments in States by developing specific axes aimed at preventing the creation of new risks and reducing existing ones through the implementation of coherent and inclusive specific measures.

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee Guidelines: Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action stemmed from the Charter for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action launched at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit. These are the first humanitarian guidelines developed with and by persons with disabilities through their representative organizations around the world. They set out the key actions to be taken by humanitarian actors at all levels to identify and respond effectively to the needs of persons with disabilities and safeguard their rights, as they are most at risk of being left invisible in crisis situations (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2019).

At the European level, in March 2021, the European Commission issued a communication on the new European Disability Strategy 2021–2030, with intent to contribute to the implementation of the Convention. The new strategy aims to improve the lives of people with disabilities within the EU and beyond and refers to the Commission’s commitments on their safety in emergencies and civil protection issues (European Commission, n.d.-b).

The purpose of the directive (EU) 2019/882 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 April 2019 on the accessibility requirements for products and services was to contribute to the proper functioning of the internal market by approximating laws, regulations and administrative provisions of the Member States as regards accessibility requirements for certain products and services. An environment where products and services are more accessible allows for a more inclusive society and facilitates independent living for persons with disabilities (Council of the European Union, 2019).

Under the framework of the European Accessibility Act directive, a new standard has been established, numbered as “EN 17210, Accessibility and usability of the built environment – Functional requirements”. It sets out the requirements that the built environment, including urban areas, needs to fulfil to be considered accessible and usable in order to reduce barriers and hence, vulnerability factors. It was drafted in response to a European Commission standardization request, known as Mandate 420, and counted with the participation and consensus of European organizations representing all the relevant stakeholders: policymakers, national standardization bodies, representatives of persons with disabilities, users, consumers and businesses (European Disability Forum, 2020). It is important to highlight that recently a number of guidelines addressed to the urban planning professionals and those involved in city development on how to incorporate disaster risk reduction (DRR) and resilience into urban planning decisions and investments have been published by the UNDRR aiming to support city governments’ resilience objectives and strategies.

In the above context, to achieve an inclusive “no one left behind” protection policy, coordinated action is required at the international European Union level, with a strong commitment by States, and regional and local authorities to implement the inclusive international framework.
Lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and beyond

It is important to point out that in recent years, hazards have emerged that are correlated with the changing of the global ecosystem, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The situation seems to become even more complicated when a disaster such as an earthquake or a wildfire event strikes in the middle of a pandemic, since there is a need to confront a multi-hazard impact. Under these circumstances, simultaneously reducing vulnerability drivers for persons with disabilities is a real challenge. Based on the information gathered during the COVID-19 pandemic, it became apparent that the gaps in data gathering relevant to persons with disabilities before the pandemic, exacerbated the limitation of relevant available data during the pandemic (Reed, Meeks and Bonnielin, 2020; World Health Organization, 2023). It came out that during the pandemic, persons with disabilities were not treated with inclusive criteria (Brennan, 2020).

At this point, it is worth noting that the absence of official data on persons with disabilities and the lack of recording at the local level was another entrenched situation that came to the fore during the pandemic. For example, in Greece, a survey was conducted with participating persons with disabilities or chronic diseases and their families, where most respondents (73.8 per cent) stated that they used digital services created during the COVID-19 pandemic to facilitate citizens’ transactions with public services. People who used these services stated that they were quite satisfied. In addition, those who said they did not use digital services stated as the main reason that digital services are not easy to use (25.2 per cent) (Kalimani, 2021); accessible and user-friendly tools, as well as accessible emergency messages, can reinforce the coping capacity of a city amid hazards and make communities resilient.

Policy recommendations

The transition to inclusive disaster risk management for making cities resilient

The inclusion of disability mainstreaming in policy planning is directly linked to the transition to a human rights-based approach to disability. The adoption of an approach assuming that disability results from the interaction between persons with disabilities and barriers, both environmental (physical, built, digital) and attitudinal, raises the issue of integrating the human rights perspective of persons with disabilities into policies and programmes in all areas. A key recommendation of the 2023 Global Survey is that authorities must build internal institutional capacities and expertise on disability inclusion and foster diversity in leadership, serving the goal to prioritize disability inclusion as a key policy concern and objective for DRR. Thus, in order to implement disability mainstreaming in civil protection and to make the transition to inclusive disaster risk management, two stages are required: first, the evaluation of the policies, measures and programmes in terms of the consequences or impact on persons with disabilities and second, the way they should be designed to make it easier for persons with disabilities to exercise their rights on an equal basis with citizens without disabilities in coping with disaster risks. This can be achieved via inclusive informative awareness-raising campaigns carried out by civil protection authorities or relevant local stakeholders, as well as participation of persons with disabilities in all phases.

4 UNDRR, Global Survey on Persons with Disabilities and Disasters 2023.
of the disaster management process through their representative organizations. The MCR 2030 “Disaster Resilience Scorecard for Cities: Annex for the inclusion of persons with disabilities”, could be adopted as a regular assessment tool of local government to design, formulate and implement policies for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in DRR.

Accessibility: “key” to equal participation

Accessibility (which plays a key role in the human rights-based approach to disability, as it contributes to removing obstacles that restrict, hinder or prohibit the autonomy, independent living and participation of persons with disabilities in economic, social, political and cultural life) is a core element of the UNCRPD and therefore of protecting the rights of persons with disabilities in crisis situations. According to article 9, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure unhindered access for persons with disabilities to the built environment, the natural environment, public transport, information and communications on an equal basis with others; in case of an emergency, accessibility of evacuation routes, emergency exits, shelters, early warning messages, etc., is a prerequisite. This is reinforced by the fact that one of the top priorities selected by the 2023 Global Survey respondents is to ensure Universal Design principles are applied in disaster risk reduction, including to guarantee resilient and accessible facilities, infrastructure, and transportation.

Data collection – inventory of citizens with disabilities

According to article 31 of the UNCRPD, the collection of data on disability could support effective policies for reducing the impact of disasters on the population with disabilities. An inventory of citizens with disabilities that include information on their type of impairment and where they dwell or work could facilitate search and rescue operations, or the evacuation process, in a crisis situation. However, personal data protection mechanisms should be engaged.

Consultation by organizations of persons with disabilities

According to paragraph 3, article 4 of the UNCRPD, representative organizations of persons with disabilities, persons with chronic diseases and their families need to be at the forefront when policies are designed, decisions and measures are taken, and programmes and actions are implemented at the national, regional and local levels for DRR. The participation of representatives of organizations of persons with disabilities in the processes of consultation, decision-making, evaluation of practices and so on, is the central pillar of a human rights-based approach to disability and a key principle of inclusive governance. The 2023 Global Survey on Persons with Disabilities and Disasters specifically mentions that persons with disabilities should be included in disaster planning, while disability experts must take on dedicated leadership responsibilities in decision-making. Moreover, persons with disabilities should be involved in the creation and execution of all policies pertaining to disaster resilience.

Training as a key component

Training is necessary for inclusive disaster risk management in two basic directions: one concerning the training of all involved bodies, services, organizations and persons engaged in the design of policies, actions, measures and programmes, and another concerning the training of all involved services and groups operating in the field. Considering that people with disabilities are a heterogeneous, their needs vary both in terms of their own impairments and the characteristics of a crisis, even within groups of people with the same impairments. The training of operational people and first responders
in cooperation with representative organizations of people with disabilities and chronic diseases, as well as their families, is an essential component in leaving no one behind and reducing the impact of disasters. The rescuers need to be trained on how to react during the search and rescue operations upon individuals with different types of impairment. Moreover, active participation of persons with disabilities in exercises for building disaster preparedness and response is substantial, especially for the communities that live nearby disaster-prone areas.

**Inclusive Early Warning Systems and Accessible Alarm Messages**

Towards strengthening disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation measures, early warning and early action is one of the best-proven and cost-effective tools for reducing disaster casualties and losses.\(^{11}\) Though, Inclusive Early Warning Systems should be people-centered, end-to-end, and capable of monitoring multi-hazards; the UN Secretary-General has called for every person on Earth to be protected by early warning systems by 2027. In that context, the risk communication means and modalities should be inclusive in the preparedness, response and recovery phases of a major event, so that to strengthen the coping capacity of all the people leaving no-one behind; e.g. provide with alarm messages easy to understand, including also people with visual or hearing impairment.\(^{12}\) Access to information, in terms of inclusive information broadcasting is a fundamental right of all the people and should be part of disaster risk management policies.

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**Conclusions**

According to the above, and as a bottom line it is apparent that in a scene of uncertainties, unprecedented conditions and multiple hazards, the Disability Inclusion in Disaster Risk Reduction and Prevention is a one-way direction for coping with current and emerging risks and for building community resilience under a holistic approach. Inclusiveness should constitute a cross-cutting element at all sectors, empowering the active engagement of all the population groups in the disaster management cycle; recording of the existing vulnerability drivers, as well as the vulnerability mechanisms and interdependencies at multi-sectoral level is also substantial. In this work, a few policy recommendations were drafted towards this direction to reinforce the inclusive disaster resilience framework for building-back better.

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11 Early Warnings for All, UNDRR, [https://www.undrr.org/early-warnings-for-all](https://www.undrr.org/early-warnings-for-all).
References


