

The INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR DISASTER REDUCTION 13 OCTOBER 2013

Disability and disasters - A NOT SO OBVIOUS CONVERSATION - Join in

<http://www.unisdr.org/2013/iddr>

Persons living with disabilities are among the most excluded in society, and their plight is magnified when a disaster strikes. Not only are they less likely to receive the aid they need during a humanitarian crisis, they are also less likely to recover in the long-term. More often than not, their unique contribution to helping communities prepare for and respond to disasters is also often overlooked.¹

This year the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR) turns its focus for the International Day for Disaster Reduction on 13 October on some one billion people around the world who live with some form of disability.

The World Health Organization states that persons living with disabilities represent one-fifth of the world's population, who still have no significant representation in the planning processes to reduce disaster risks, prevent disasters or build resilient societies and communities.

According to news reports, when an earthquake struck California in 1994, a man was turned away from a shelter because the staff could not understand sign language. People with cerebral palsy were ignored because shelter volunteers thought they were on drugs, according to Handicap International.

It was also reported that after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, there were many examples of persons with disabilities being unable to escape the waves and drowning. In Sambodhi Residential Home in Galle, Sri Lanka, only 41 of its 102 residents survived; many of those who died were unable to leave their beds or failed to comprehend in time the need to escape.

These examples amongst countless other similar situations all over disaster prone parts of the world are the issues driving the upcoming International Day for Disaster Reduction on 13 October 2013.

Persons living with disabilities are often doubly vulnerable to disasters; because of their disability and because they are more likely to be poor with limited access to education, health care, shelter, food and work before a crisis strikes.

Persons living with disabilities are often invisible – sometimes literally hidden away by their families. Both government and aid agencies often do not know of their existence and their needs. Those injured and disabled as a result of a disaster or conflict, however, are often very visible – it makes good headline news. As Meriah Nichols, a mother of three living with a disability muses, “disability is indeed the only minority group that anyone can join at any time.” Yet once one joins this group, the visibility disappears as does one's previous right to contribute to society, it would seem.

The lack of inclusion and participation in disaster risk reduction processes means that the needs and possible contributions of persons living with disabilities are often overlooked by planners.

Yet persons living with blindness or low vision can be more effective at search and rescue in conditions where it is difficult to see than those with sight, who can become disorientated and panic. In such situations roles are reversed and disability becomes very much an issue of context which is a reminder that perhaps all human kind at some point lives with a disability. According to Handicap International, some people with living with disabilities are less likely than those without a disability to panic and become injured during an earthquake, for example, because they are used to dealing with difficult environments everyday.

Despite all that is known, however, it seems that very little is being done to change the status quo of persons living with disabilities, the uncertainties with which they live and the heightened threats they face in disaster scenarios.

¹ Thomas Reuters Foundation <http://www.trust.org/spotlight/People-with-disabilities/>

At a global level, the issue of disability often takes a back seat. One good example is the omission of persons living with disabilities from the UN Millennium Declaration which has eight specific goals ranging from halving extreme poverty to halting the spread of HIV and AIDS to providing universal primary education by 2015. Although these goals have galvanized global efforts to meet the needs of the world's poorest, persons living with disabilities who feature prominently amongst the world's poorest are more or less absent from those efforts.

There is a global conversation currently taking place about disaster risk reduction. It takes its cue from the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) – the global disaster risk reduction plan that was adopted in 2005 for 10 years to build the resilience of nations and communities to disasters. The HFA is the first plan to explain, describe and detail an all-of-society approach to reduce disaster losses and impacts. It does not, however, make a direct reference to persons living with disabilities, although it spells out the need to take account of cultural diversities, age, and other causes of vulnerability when planning for disaster risk reduction. Conversely there is very little reference to disability in many national and local disaster management and risk reduction plans around the world.

Persons living with disabilities are disfranchised and more often than not invisible. There is a lack of appropriate concern among governing and decision making structures. In addition there is a lack of statistical data worldwide on disability as well as a lack of expertise on addressing the needs of persons with disabilities.

A survey last year in Fiji of disability inclusiveness in disaster preparedness and risk reduction found, however, that persons living with disabilities are not considered in disaster evacuation processes. The Pacific Disability Forum Programme Manager Katabwena Tawaka went even further and to state that the summary of findings found that persons with disabilities were not part of any processes at all - before, during and after disasters.

In 2011, a federal judge ruled that the city of Los Angeles was unprepared to meet the needs of the disabled in the case of a disaster and was discriminating against them by failing to include the disabled in its emergency preparedness plans. Siding with disability-rights groups who sued the city on behalf of an estimated 800,000 L.A. residents living with disabilities, U.S. District Court Judge Consuelo B. Marshall found that Los Angeles did not have a plan to notify and evacuate persons with disabilities or provide them with transportation and shelter in a disaster.

"Because of the city's failure to address their unique needs, individuals with disabilities are disproportionately vulnerable to harm in the event of an emergency or disaster," the judge wrote, noting that the city's own Department on Disability reported in 2008 that residents living with disabilities are "at-risk for suffering and death in disproportionate numbers."

In the just concluded Fourth Session of the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction which was held in Geneva from 21-23 May, the Chair's summary stated that "Inclusiveness, participation and empowerment have been identified as a means of ensuring lasting impacts on risk reduction ... Women's, youth and children's groups, people living with disabilities and the vast array of voluntary associations have all demonstrated how they have taken action to build resilience."

The 2013 International Day intends to switch on and amplify the "Not So Obvious Conversation" that must take place on the critical issue of addressing the needs of persons living with disabilities in potential disaster scenarios. It invites the one billion persons living with disabilities to express their concerns, needs and recommendations that will enhance implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) – the global disaster risk reduction plan that was adopted in 2005 to build the resilience of nations and communities to disasters which completes its 10 year term in 2015.

The International Day is also an opportunity for persons living with disabilities to be included in and express themselves in the post 2015 consultations on the post 2015 framework that began in March 2012. The goal is a successor for to the HFA which is the product of the broadest possible consultations and reflects the wide and diverse views of the many stake holders who have invested in disaster risk reduction efforts to date.

Join UNISDR, United Nations ENABLE and other partners on 13 October in A NOT SO OBVIOUS CONVERSATION – Living with Disability & Disasters. There are well over a billion voices of those who are directly affected by the issues we are raising. There are also many more who experience it indirectly - perhaps through a brother, sister, mother, child, father or even good friend who is living with a disability. Get involved. Every one who joins the conversation on 13 October can help change the current status quo and influence the next generation HFA which in 2015.

"Disability is not a brave struggle or 'courage in the face of adversity.' Disability is an art. It's an ingenious way to live," observes Neil Marcus, a man living with dystonia and an award-winning playwright, actor, poet, and performance artist. If the goal of Resilient People, Resilient Planet is to become a reality for tomorrow's generations then surely this ingenuity is needed to help the world on its way.

