

Disability and Vulnerability: A primer

1. Vulnerability

Vulnerability is the characteristics and circumstances of a community, system or asset that make it susceptible to the damaging effects of a hazard. (UNISDR, 2009).

Persons with disabilities account for between 15% to 20% of the global community. This figure is higher in a developing country context. (World Report on Disability, 2011).

The circumstances that persons with disabilities consistently face include lower educational enrolment and attainment; limited employment opportunities; limited access to information, services and resources and an increased likelihood of a life in poverty.

2. Multiple jeopardies

Within a disaster context all are vulnerable. Poverty, however, greatly increases vulnerability and exposure to risk.

At-risk groups, including women and children, living in poverty face further constraints to opportunities, participation and security.

Women and children with disabilities who are living in poverty face multiple jeopardies of further discrimination, exclusion and increased risk.

Disability is cross-cutting. Disability affects women, children and men alike and magnifies existing vulnerabilities among individuals, families and communities.

3. Disability and risk

Persons with disabilities may be placed at increased disaster risk due to cognitive or physical impairments. These factors may limit the ability of a person with disabilities to access information and/or to act on that information.

A wheelchair user, for example, may have no difficulty relating to general disaster risk reduction (DRR) information. However, that same individual may face severe barriers in safely protecting themselves during, and evacuating after, an earthquake.

Conversely, a Deaf individual may require more imaginative approaches on the part of DRR trainers, but may face no more difficulty in protecting and evacuating themselves than non-Deaf peers.

To date, the DRR community has paid little attention to widening the active participation of persons with disabilities. Similarly, little attention has been paid to addressing the environmental barriers and constraints that persons with disabilities face within a DRR context.

As such, the way in which DRR is most usually done continues to exclude and denies access to potentially life-saving information and procedures for the most at-risk within communities.

4. Post-2015 recommendations

Disability primarily concerns how we decide to shape and view our communities and societies.

The DRR community is inherently concerned with reducing risk and vulnerability, as such:

DiDRRN partners urge the DRR community to stay true to our collective vision and to ensure the inclusion of those at greatest risk within DRR post-2015.

This will, no doubt, be best achieved by recognising the contribution of persons with disabilities within DRR and ensuring the full and active participation of persons with disabilities themselves.