

Background Note for the Global Partnership on Children with Disabilities

Inclusive Humanitarian Action

Introduction

Children with disabilities are among the most marginalised and excluded groups of children, experiencing widespread violations of their rights. These violations dehumanise them, deny them respect for their dignity, their individuality, even the right to life itself, particularly in situations of humanitarian crisis. To promote collaboration and coordination on issues of children with disabilities and achieving results for children, UNICEF is working with UN entities, persons with disabilities and their representative organizations, governments, civil society organizations and other partners to establish the Global Partnership on Children with Disabilities and Development.

Estimates of the number of children with disabilities globally vary between 90 - 150 million (WHO/WB 2011: 36)¹. According to UNICEF, over one billion children under the age of 18 live in areas affected by conflict (UNICEF April 2009) and millions are affected annually by natural disasters. UNHCR Global Trends 2011 reports that 46% of refugees worldwide are under the age of 18 years. It is estimated that for every child that dies through conflict, three times as many are injured or permanently disabled (Pearn 2000). The ICRC estimates that in Afghanistan alone, a million children have been disabled in the ongoing conflict².

Article 11 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) states that States Parties shall: "...ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk, including situations of armed conflict, humanitarian emergencies and the occurrence of natural disasters." The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) also contains provisions relating to the rights of children with disabilities, including a prohibition against discrimination on the grounds of disability³, and obligations to provide services for children with disabilities to enable them to achieve the fullest possible social integration.⁴

As per these international treaties, persons with disabilities have the same rights as everyone else in times of conflict and emergencies, however, these rights are often violated. It is in this context that the Global Partnership on Children with Disabilities can bring the spotlight back to this extremely vulnerable group and engage with states, donors, non-governmental organisations and all other actors involved in emergency response to undertake concerted, strategic and concrete action to meaningfully include children with disabilities in humanitarian action- in plans, policies, programmes and interventions.

Barriers and Vulnerabilities Faced By Children with Disabilities in Situations of Humanitarian Crisis

Children experience, and children with disabilities even more acutely, some of the worst effects of humanitarian crisis due to their physical, emotional and social level of development, as well as the lack of protection, age and disability appropriate physical and psychosocial support and

¹ UNCRPD

² ICRC 'Promotion and protection of the rights of children: ICRC statement to the United Nations, 2011'17-10-2011 Statement to United Nations, General Assembly, 66th session, Third Committee, item 65 of the agenda, statement by the ICRC, New York, 17 October 2011.

³ CRC Article 2

⁴ CRC, Article 23

resources. Food, shelter, healthcare, education and support services may be lacking or not inclusive of children with disabilities. In addition, children with disabilities may be:

- Unable to access early warning systems and unable to escape during a crisis due to inaccessible evacuation routes. For example, a child in a wheelchair may be unable to flee a tsunami or gunfire. They could also be abandoned by families escaping an emergency.
- Lose their assistive devices or become separated from their carers/family, and as such may be extremely vulnerable to physical violence and to sexual, emotional and verbal abuse.
- Hidden and invisible due to family and community beliefs or stigma. For example, a child with an intellectual disability may not be identified during registration, data collection or needs assessments.
- Excluded from or unable to access mainstream assistance programmes such as child friendly spaces and youth empowerment programmes, health or food distribution points due both to physical barriers (i.e. lack of accessible facilities) or attitudinal barriers in the form of negative attitudes and uncompromising environments. Research in refugees and displaced persons settings has demonstrated that children with disabilities are not actively encouraged to attend education programmes and experience high dropout rates due to a lack of appropriately trained support staff and teachers, and difficulty in accessing school buildings and facilities (WRC, 2008)
- Experiencing newly created environmental barriers (collapsed buildings and ramps), inaccessible camp infrastructure and unavailability of previously established services (sign language interpreters or assistive device repair) or systems of support (community support, social security payments or social protection schemes).

Despite being one of the most vulnerable groups, children with disabilities are invisible and routinely excluded in emergency responses.⁵ Negative attitudes towards children with disabilities escalate during humanitarian crisis.⁶ Barriers faced by children with disabilities and their families are rarely acknowledged or included when assessing the impact of emergencies on populations (WRD 2011: 36-37). Disability may also be a result of emergencies. For example, injuries may be exacerbated by lack of healthcare during emergencies, increasing the risk of sepsis, infectious diseases and other complications with profound long-term physical and psychological implications for the injured child. Even though emergencies have devastating effects, they also provide the opportunity to “build back better”⁷ and for children with disabilities, this can truly be the case. It is a chance for all humanitarian stakeholders including states, UN entities, mainstream national and international non-governmental organizations, disability-specific organisations, disabled people’s organisations, families and communities to work together to rebuild a more inclusive society. The Global Partnership on Children with Disabilities can play a key role in this process.

Inclusive Humanitarian Action: Beneficial for the Entire Population

Inclusive humanitarian action can prevent and protect against the devastating effects that armed conflicts, natural disasters and emergency situations can have on a person’s physical, psychosocial and emotional well-being. It also ensures the right to survival, development and well-being for all persons affected, especially people living in situations of vulnerability, irrespective of age, sex, disability, ethnic and social origin etc.

Resources allocated for humanitarian action should budget for and be utilized to build inclusive and accessible environments and programmes for all. The cost of building accessible schools,

⁵ http://www.cbm.org/article/downloads/71140/Fact_sheet_Disability_in_Conflict_and_Emergencies.pdf

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See for example: http://www.unicef.org/spanish/emerg/disasterinasia/files/TSUNAMI_E_BOOK_spreads.pdf

water and sanitation as well as health facilities, shelters, safe roads and other infrastructure that can benefit the whole population, is almost the same when properly planned. Instead of building and re-building new barriers and perpetuating exclusion, universal/inclusive design should be adopted as a strategy. It is an opportunity that should not be missed.

Disability-inclusive humanitarian action is informed by and grounded in key principles and programming approaches based on equity, gender equality, human rights, humanitarian principles and participation. These include:

- A rights-based approach informed by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Humanitarian action targeting children with disabilities should be informed by human rights principles including non-discrimination, respect for dignity, autonomy, independence of the individual, gender equality and respect for difference and diversity.
- An inclusive approach ensures the full, effective and equitable participation of children with disabilities at all levels of decision-making and programming. It recognizes that children with disabilities have the same needs as any other children, in addition to their disability-specific needs (which are only a small part of their overall needs).
- An inclusive approach to humanitarian actions calls for holistic and inclusive programmes, rather than just isolated projects and policies targeting children with disabilities. It addresses social, attitudinal, informational and physical barriers that impede participation and decision-making of children with disabilities in regular programmes.
- Ensuring accessibility and universal design of infrastructure and information: This includes making the physical environment, all facilities, services, shelters and schools, health services, organization and information accessible for children with disabilities. It aims to realize full and equal access of children with disabilities to mainstream and specialized services.
- Promoting independent living: Children with disabilities can live as independently as possible, are self-sufficient and participate to their fullest extent in all aspects of life.
- Integrating age, gender and diversity awareness: Paying special attention to the double or triple discrimination faced by women and girls with disabilities.

Potential Issues/ Areas Where the GPCWD may Influence the Global Agenda:

1. A General Assembly resolution on inclusive humanitarian response. Such a resolution would call on all relevant stakeholders engaged in emergency response to undertake concrete actions to meaningfully include persons with disabilities in humanitarian action.
2. Evidence based research on children with disabilities in emergency situations to support the development of more inclusive programmes and policies.
3. Humanitarian needs assessments and monitoring mechanisms identify persons with disabilities and incorporates improved collection, analysis and reporting of sex-, age- and disability-disaggregated data, to assess the performance of humanitarian agencies in delivering assistance along inclusive principles and practices.
4. All post emergency reconstruction and rebuilding is inclusive; applying principles of universal design in all reconstruction and rebuilding programmes.