Disability should not be a death sentence: global disaster response must be inclusive

Persons with disabilities are consistently excluded from disaster planning and response efforts. Accessibility and inclusion can help ensure we are not left behind, writes Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame

Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame chair of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Global advocacy manager for Sightsavers

When the covid-19 restrictions took effect in Senegal, Fatima (not her real name) found herself unable to understand much of what was happening. Besides the news on the radio, all other information, including on registering for a vaccination, was inaccessible to her as a blind person. She was isolated in her home, scared, and it was difficult to find someone to guide her outside, as the fears of infection were so great.

Fatima is just one of the millions of people who have been left without adequate support when disaster strikes. This is seen during pandemics and when resources are inaccessible during natural disasters or conflict.

An estimated 1.3 billion people live with disabilities globally, and they are consistently excluded from disaster planning and response efforts. This can mean anything from being left behind when trying to escape danger, to shelters and emergency information being inaccessible. Furthermore, people with disabilities face ingrained systemic disadvantages, with research showing that they are more likely to live in poverty, lack access to education, and experience poorer health outcomes.

These disparities mean that persons with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by disasters. They face a higher risk of dying or being injured, have more difficulty being evacuated or sheltered, and face more health obstacles during and after disasters or conflict. This is despite the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) requiring signatories to protect those with disabilities during disasters, without discrimination.

The deadly impacts of this exclusion were starkly shown during the pandemic. Global data around disability is lacking, but research shows that people with disabilities were almost three times more likely to die from covid-19. They were consistently excluded from pandemic response plans, and as a result faced higher risks and more severe outcomes. On the UNCRPD committee I have witnessed reports of the immense challenges faced by people with disabilities trying to survive disasters such as the conflict in Ukraine and flooding in Pakistan.

Women and girls with disabilities face the greatest challenges. Globally, almost one in five women has a disability. They are often among the most marginalised in society, experiencing high rates of gender based violence, sexual abuse, and exploitation. This is further exacerbated during crises and conflict. During the pandemic, for example, reports of domestic violence skyrocketed, with women with disabilities being disproportionately affected.

Despite a dire need for progress on disability rights, the voices of persons with disabilities—especially women—are rarely heard at the decision making levels that impact people during disasters. I am proud to chair the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, but as a woman with a disability from Ghana, I am in the minority in multilateral and government institutions. This lack of representation can have fatal consequences.

People with disabilities need to be in positions of leadership to be able to input on decisions that affect them. Governments and development actors must work directly with representative organisations, including those of women and girls with disabilities, when planning and enacting disaster risk management and humanitarian interventions. This should include policy formulation, preparedness, and disaster response and intervention.

Overall inclusion, accessibility, and provision of reasonable accommodation must be incorporated at the start of all planning and programme design, not added as an afterthought. Accountability mechanisms should be established to ensure disaster response is inclusive of all. Data on populations should be disaggregated by disability, so people with disabilities are visible in this information.

Information in situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies must be accessible, including early warning and evacuation systems, assistance, and essential health information. Emergency responders, health care workers, and everyone in service roles, should be trained on disability awareness and communication. Guidance exists to support governments and agencies to meet these requirements.

Disability rights must be recognised and protected in all aspects of disaster management and wider society. This means ensuring that people with disabilities have access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. It also means challenging ableism and discrimination. Too often, we as people with disability are seen as burdens or liabilities, rather than assets to society who bring unique strengths and perspectives to the table.

Disability should not be a death sentence. Disability is a part of the human experience to be embraced and
celebrated. By working towards a more inclusive and equitable future we can create a world where no one is left behind, no matter the circumstances.

Competing interests: Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame is global advocacy manager for social inclusion at Sightsavers. She also chairs the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and is president of the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (Africa).

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