Submission to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Questionnaire on Persons with Disabilities and Climate Change

*Sightsavers – December 2019*

The below submission sets out Sightsavers’ response to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Questionnaire on Persons with Disabilities and Climate Change. The first section outlines information in response to Questions 1 and 3 – related to the impact of climate change on persons with disabilities (1) and examples of the adverse effects of climate change (3). The second section sets out evidence in response to Question 5 – outlining examples of good practices, challenges and recommendations (5).

# Climate change and disability

Poverty, minority status, gender, age, disability and other demographic factors make some people less resilient to climate change than others[[1]](#endnote-1). In the Fifth Assessment Report, it is noted that climate change interacts with other stressors and structural inequities to shape vulnerabilities, and that socially disadvantaged people at the ‘intersection of various dimensions of discrimination’ including gender, age, race, class, caste, indigeneity and disability are ‘particularly negatively affected by climate change and climate-related hazards’[[2]](#endnote-2).

The importance of ensuring an inclusive approach to addressing the risks posed by climatic change is acknowledged in the Paris Agreement which implores all member states to respect their obligations on human rights, including: ‘the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations and the right to development, as well as gender equality, empowerment of women and intergenerational equity[[3]](#endnote-3)’.

The relationship between climate risk and disability is a neglected, yet critical, development issue. Environmental hazards associated with climate change often become disasters for people with disabilities as they expose existing ***inequality and forms of discrimination***. People with disabilities in developing countries are often living in poverty, and poorer people are often more likely to experience disability. People with disabilities can often face a multitude of barriers accessing quality health care, education and employment. This context means people with disabilities tend to have low levels of resilience to the impacts of climate crises when they occur[[4]](#endnote-4).

That climate crises expose existing inequality is particularly relevant for ***women and women with disabilities***. Prevalent, discriminatory attitudes around gender can represent huge barriers to women’s right to health care, education and employment in daily life and during crises. Expected gender roles in some contexts can make women more vulnerable to climate hazards. For example, collecting food and supplies during periods of flooding can increase risk and the chance of contracting diseases. Reduced social mobility in comparison to men can also impact vulnerability. Men may be able to evacuate independently, move freely and stay with neighbours during climate crises, but this may not be considered culturally appropriate for women. In some contexts, men with disabilities may be physically carried by anyone in an evacuation, but this may not be considered possible for women with disabilities[[5]](#endnote-5).

During climate crises, people with disabilities are often targeted with ***violence and sexual abuse*** which is common at shelters and in the community. The lack of separate spaces for women at shelters is often a serious issue, particularly for pregnant women and adolescent girls. Women often report that they do not feel safe at community shelters, due to the high risk of sexual violence. Women with disabilities often feel they are targeted as abusive men do not believe women with disabilities have the capacity to report abuse. Women with disabilities also fear abuse in their homes during climate crises, as men from neighbouring areas impacted by climate change move into their communities[[6]](#endnote-6).

Entrenched ***stigma and discrimination*** also impact resilience. Families may isolate or abandon relatives with disabilities on a daily basis and during crises. Levels of poverty may also force care givers to leave their family members with disabilities at home, and exposed to climate risk, whilst seeking an income. Institutional discrimination can also prevent people with disabilities accessing emergency health, education and other vital services. In many contexts, girls with disabilities may not be supported by their families as they do not believe they can be productive[[7]](#endnote-7).

Disability tends to be grossly under-represented in the data used to plan, mitigate, respond and adapt to climate risk. Discrimination is a contributing factor in the ***lack of information and data*** that is available on disability. Families often hide or do not report people with disabilities, and people with disabilities themselves may choose not to identify as ‘disabled’ due to the social stigma that this can have in many discriminatory contexts. This undermines the provision of effective and appropriate climate change adaptation, preparedness, response and relief[[8]](#endnote-8).

The result is often ***inaccessible interventions that exclude people with disabilities from accessing vital information and services***. The tools used to undertake vulnerability assessments often do not consider disability, gender or ensure the participation of women with disabilities that is vital for informing appropriate gender-sensitive and disability-inclusive interventions. This results in inaccessible climate change adaptation, early warning systems, evacuation plans, shelters, and relief distribution[[9]](#endnote-9). Climate change can also dramatically change the physical environment, making effective planning involving people with disabilities all the more crucial[[10]](#endnote-10).

The outcome of the above context is ***increased risk factors*** for people with disabilities, who face increased exposure to risk due to the overall societal context, inaccessibility and discrimination. It is critical to note that ***risk is compounded by intersecting factors***, such as gender, age and minority status, which further increase risk and an individual’s lived experience during crises. Crucially, all of the above factors can impact decision making and whether people with disabilities even try to adapt, evacuate or access relief during climate crises[[11]](#endnote-11).

Understanding how different factors intersect to shape the lived experience is crucial for more effective decision making. This is why ***inclusive, people-centred approaches***, that consider which individuals in societies are likely to experience contextual marginalisation and ensure their engagement in the design of effective interventions that enhance their resilience, are required[[12]](#endnote-12).

# Examples of good practice

There is a small but growing evidence base of inclusive practice in climate change adaptation programmes[[13]](#endnote-13). This includes ensuring the ***systematic inclusion of people with disabilities in vulnerability assessment***. Action Aid have embedded principles of human rights throughout their Resilience Framework to ensure programmes target and include the most vulnerable people[[14]](#endnote-14). Ensuring the tools used by all actors to assess vulnerability in climate change adaptation programmes are inclusive is therefore a priority[[15]](#endnote-15).

Climate change adaptation programmes can also be more impactful by ***establishing networks*** to assist with adaptation, preparedness and evacuations, situating wells and aid distribution centres in ***accessible locations***, ensuring accessible technologies, providing fuel efficient stoves to people with restricted mobility, and livestock diversification grants to people with disabilities whose livelihoods may be at risk[[16]](#endnote-16). ***Targeted social protection*** can also help enhance the resilience of people with disabilities - as considering climate risk in social protection allows programmes to identify those most at risk.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Examples of inclusive resilience building include the use of **‘*survival yards*’** in Niger. This intervention aims to provide security for families by planting borders of tress to protect the land inside, which includes water wells and watering canals, by creating a micro-climate against hash winds. CBM and their partners used survival yards to enhance the resilience of a number of families with members with disabilities, and successful harvests provided fruit and vegetables to eat and sell, food for livestock and firewood[[18]](#endnote-18). The introduction of homestead and keyhole gardens for populations at risk of food insecurity in Lesotho holds similar lessons for including and enhancing the resilience of people with disabilities[[19]](#endnote-19).

Evidence from Myanmar demonstrates the critical importance of the ***inclusion, participation and leadership*** of people with disabilities for enhancing resilience. Malteser International conducted participatory hazard vulnerability and capacity assessments that led to the community designing plans that targeted older people, pregnant women, people with disabilities and children. Evidence from this project also demonstrates how through engaging with the diversity of the community, some community members have changed their previously discriminatory ***attitudes*** – where previously they saw people with disabilities as ‘a burden’ they now understand and advocate for disability rights[[20]](#endnote-20).

Reconstruction after disasters have struck is also an opportunity to enhance resilience in an inclusive way. In India, CARE ensured they ***‘built back better’*** by integrating accessibility into the provision of wash facilities[[21]](#endnote-21), whilst Practical Action and DESMiO ensured people with disabilities participated in and benefited from accessible and resilient housing reconstruction in Sri Lanka[[22]](#endnote-22).

# Recommendations

It is critical to note that people with disabilities are not a homogenous group, and that individuals can experience multiple layers of intersecting identities. This is why ***inclusive, people-centred approaches***, that consider individuals in societies who are likely to experience contextual marginalisation, and ensure their engagement in the design of effective interventions that enhance their resilience, are required.

A number of recommendations from disability-inclusive interventions can be drawn from the available evidence[[23]](#endnote-23):

* ***Inclusive, integrated approaches*** to humanitarian response, climate change adaptation and sustainable development are more effective. They recognise that factors intersect to shape risk, and that the long-term challenges posed by environmental hazards, climate change, conflicts, and development cannot be separated, so require complementary approaches that enhance resilience and coping capacities in everyday life.
* Mainstreaming inclusion through a ***twin-track approach*** that embeds inclusion into all interventions, and provides targeted interventions where required, is most effective. For example, an effective food security programme would consider how people with disabilities, women, older persons and other groups would access its services, to ensure they are not further excluded. A targeted intervention may also be appropriate in some contexts, for example, a food security programme that focuses on enhancing the resilience of households that include people with disabilities.
* Broader forms of context analysis, tools and assessments that ensure processes for ***participation*** in all stages of adaptation, preparedness, response and resilience building help to ensure the voice and perspectives of contextually marginalised people inform appropriate interventions.
* ***Engagement***, ***representation and leadership*** on decision-making bodies from marginalised and minority groups leads to greater understanding, continued co-ordination around key issues, effective collaboration and enhanced resilience moving forwards.
* ***Data disaggregated by disability*** and minority status can be used to inform more effective, and inclusive, interventions that build long term resilience. Better data on marginalised groups is essential for ensuring appropriate, targeted interventions to enhancing climate resilience.
* The most effective long-term interventions build the ***resilience*** of marginalised groups, through effective empowerment, systems strengthening, and developing the capacity of institutions to ensure rights are embedded and respected, recognising non-discrimination as a fundamental principle.

For the Paris Agreement, Sendai Framework and Agenda 2030 to be realised in practice, the rights of people with disabilities must be embedded in resilience building efforts. The effective participation, engagement and empowerment of people with disabilities – and other people considered to be at high risk – will ultimately be critical to their success. In order to achieve this, further inclusive practice must emerge that ensures the systematic inclusion of people with disabilities in programmes and policies designed to address climate risk and build climate resilience, and that empower people with disabilities to play an active role in the decisions that impact how climate risk, disaster mitigation and poverty alleviation are planned for and implemented[[24]](#endnote-24).

# Further information

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