

Disability, Displacement and Climate Change

April 2021

80 percent of persons with disabilities live in low and middle-income countries, many of which are highly climate vulnerable. For example, [54.3%](#) and [27%](#) of the adult populations of Afghanistan and Syria respectively have a disability.*

* including physical, intellectual, psychosocial, sensory or other impairments.

Climate change may lead to a higher risk of forced displacement through an increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, such as cyclones and drought, as well as environmental degradation that impacts livelihoods and survival.

People with disabilities face heightened protection risks and barriers to inclusion and are likely to have specific, additional needs related to forced displacement in the context of disasters and climate change.

RISKS BEFORE DISPLACEMENT

Higher poverty and food insecurity rates amongst people with disabilities, and inadequate housing, tend to heighten their exposure and vulnerability to hazards, which can [increase their risk of forced displacement](#).

People with disabilities often face barriers accessing information and resources which limit their knowledge and capacity to adapt to climate change.

People with disabilities are more likely to be impacted by disasters, as disaster preparedness programs and early warning systems are often inaccessible—not provided in sign language or audio messages for example. Evacuation systems and personnel are not prepared in advance to support people with different impairments.



In many low and middle-income countries, only 5-15% of people who require assistive devices and technologies have access to them.

RISKS DURING DISPLACEMENT

People with disabilities may be unable to move out of harm's way due to the inaccessibility of evacuation paths, absence of support or social exclusion. For those left behind in high risk situations, the loss of support networks increases their vulnerability further.

Temporary shelter and evacuation centers are often inaccessible to people with physical or visual impairments. Temporary schools might not be accessible for boys and girls with disabilities and teachers might not be trained on how to best include them.

People with disabilities may face heightened protection risks including discrimination, exploitation and violence in disaster response contexts. [See more](#)



The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities requires States to protect persons with disabilities in disasters.

INCREASED RISKS FOR REFUGEES AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

The prevalence of disability among forcibly displaced populations is higher in certain host countries, compounding risk for refugees. [For example, 21% of the Syrian refugee population in Jordan has a disability.](#)

Refugees and internally displaced persons are often highly exposed and vulnerable to climate-related shocks and environmental degradation. Over 40% of refugees are hosted in a highly climate vulnerable country, and over 70% of persons internally displaced due to conflict are displaced in such a country. *UNHCR analysis. Data Sources: [University of Notre Dame](#), [UNHCR Data Finder](#) & [iDMC](#).*

In hosting areas, climate and environmental risks may add to humanitarian and protection needs, particularly for those with a disability. Many forcibly displaced people settle in camps and in slums, where infrastructure and services are weak and inaccessible, impacting the autonomy and dignity of persons with disabilities, especially when there has been loss or damage of assistive devices.

The barriers for people with disabilities in such environments are heightened. For example, climate change is expected to expose hundreds of millions of people to increased water stress. Forcibly displaced women, men, girls and boys with disabilities already face barriers accessing safe water for drinking, sanitation and hygiene, and some may also have increased sensitivity to water-borne pathogens.

DISABILITY-INCLUSIVE APPROACHES CAN REDUCE FORCED DISPLACEMENT RELATED RISK

Promising practices for **tailored planning, preparedness and risk reduction**:

A village **early warning system in the Philippines** incorporates bells and flags to provide residents with both sound and visual signals to evacuate.

In Japan, people with disabilities in protracted displacement situations following disasters have **been prioritized for public housing**.

A project in Niger aims to **enhance the food security and livelihoods of people with disabilities** in drought-affected areas and so reduce their risk of displacement.

A volunteer helps a man with a disability get through a flood in Thailand, 2017.



Participation is key: Since people with disabilities are best placed to identify their needs, they must be **at the forefront of designing and evaluating disaster risk reduction, climate adaptation and humanitarian responses to address displacement-related risks and impacts**. Organisations of people with disabilities **should be actively sought out and engaged** across these different areas of policy and action.

To make people count, we must count people correctly: Better data is needed on the prevalence, location, needs and resources of forcibly displaced people with a range of disabilities to inform targeted, adequate and inclusive planning and responses that respect their human rights. This includes age and sex disaggregated data and qualitative data to compare the situation of people with disabilities before and after their displacement.

Accessibility is a precondition for the inclusion of people with disabilities. Preparedness measures should assume some forcibly displaced people will have disability-related needs and consider the accessibility of early warning systems, evacuation procedures and shelters as standard practice. There are many accessibility measures that can be put in place immediately, even if data is still lacking. This increases accessibility not only for persons with disabilities, but also to the broader community.

Intersectional approach: Neither forcibly displaced people nor people with disabilities are homogenous groups. Their diverse experiences according to disabilities, sex, age, race, gender identity and other characteristics should be considered. **The human rights and needs of under-represented groups of people with disabilities** such as persons with intellectual disabilities, persons with mental health conditions and deaf-blind persons **require specific attention**.

CONTACT US

Andrew Harper
 Special Advisor on Climate Action
 UNHCR, United Nations High
 Commissioner for Refugees
harper@unhcr.org

Barbara Essig
 Policy Expert
 Internal Displacement
 Monitoring Centre
barbara.essig@idmc.ch

Elham Youssefian
 Inclusive Humanitarian Action and
 Disaster Risk Reduction Adviser
 International Disability Alliance
eyoussefian@ida-secretariat.org

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