



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

UNHCR'S APPROACH TO PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN DISPLACEMENT



Introduction

It is estimated that around 15 per cent of the world's population has a disability.* This percentage is likely to be higher in displacement situations. However, persons with disability are often under-identified at reception, which negatively impacts their access to protection and assistance.

Forced displacement disproportionately affects persons with disabilities who are more likely to be left behind or abandoned. They are often at higher risk of violence, exploitation and abuse, face barriers to access basic services, and are often excluded from education and live-lihood opportunities.

Persons with disabilities are not a homogeneous group. It is important to recognize the diversity of persons with disabilities and that women, men, youth, older persons and persons with different types of disabilities are affected differently. Women, children and older persons face an even higher risk of discrimination, violence and exploitation.

Persons with disabilities include those with long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

Displaced persons with disabilities have the same basic needs as other persons. In addition, they may experience difficulty in moving, hearing, seeing, communicating or learning. These difficulties amplify the often severe challenges posed by forced displacement. As any other person, they also have different capacities and contribute in different ways to their communities. Disability inclusion is an institutional commitment at UNHCR to ensure people living with disabilities have access to vital services, including access to information, feedback, and complaints mechanisms.

As highlighted in the [Executive Committee Conclusion No. 110 \(LXI\)–2010](#), it is important for UNHCR to ensure that the rights of persons with disabilities who are of concern to the Office are met without discrimination.

UNHCR's "Age, Gender and Diversity (AGD) Policy", revised in 2018, is one of the core tools to ensure that refugees and other displaced people enjoy their rights on an equal footing and participate meaningfully in the decisions that affect their lives, families and communities. The Policy ensures that programming is inclusive and accessible to all displaced people and responsive to differing levels and types of needs and abilities. It reaffirms UNHCR's commitment to the equal enjoyment of rights by all persons of concern, and recognizes that age, gender, disability and other aspects of diversity play a central role in influencing needs, protection risks and capacities.

UNHCR's work is guided by a rights-based approach, and focuses on the meaningful engagement of persons with disabilities in all decisions that affect them; this includes the identification and resolution of barriers - including environmental, attitudinal and communication barriers - preventing persons with disabilities from accessing and participating in programmes and activities on equal basis with others.

The United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy (UNDIS) was launched by the UN Secretary-General in June 2019. It is a comprehensive strategy for ensuring that the United Nations system is fit for purpose in relation to disability inclusion. Given the cross-cutting nature of disability inclusion, it is beyond the reach, capacity, and resources of any one agency to address this in isolation. UNHCR welcomes the coherent and systematic approach set out in the Strategy, to make a lasting difference in the lives of persons with disabilities.

UNHCR contributed to the development of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Guidelines on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action and is committed to strengthen the participation and inclusion of persons with disabilities in the design, planning, programming, monitoring, evaluation and coordination of its programmes. The IASC guidelines are considered an important contribution by the humanitarian community to the UNDIS Strategy.

Cover photo: Mohammad, 28, talks with PSP Officer Ihab Shaban outside his home. Mohammad was forced to flee his home in Aleppo, Syria in 2018. Ongoing violence and airstrikes destroyed his neighborhood and gravely injured Mohammad, leaving him paralyzed from the waist down. With the help of friends, he fled to Jordan and was reunited with his family. © UNHCR/Hannah Maule-ffin

* World Health Organization



Samer Boulos, a young Iraqi refugee with autism, attends a UNHCR-supported children's centre run by Caritas in Beirut. Ball games help him to interact with others in the group. © UNHCR/Diego Ibarra Sánchez

“The organizations of the United Nations system, individually and collectively, state their intention of and commitment to continuing to pursue the goals of inclusion and empowerment of persons with disabilities and their human rights, well-being and perspectives. The organizations will systematically embed the rights of persons with disabilities in the work of the United Nations both externally, through programming, and internally, and they will build trust and confidence among persons with disabilities to ensure that they are valued and their dignity and rights are respected and that, in the workplace, they find the workplace an enabling environment in which to fully and effectively participate on an equal basis with others.”

United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy



A teacher supervises a braille class in the Dadaab refugee camp. Hormud Primary School provides schooling to regular students, but also to students with hearing, mental and physical needs. © UNHCR/Sebastian Rich

UNHCR's efforts to address the protection and assistance needs of persons of concern living with disabilities are based on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and focus on the central principles of participation and non-discrimination.

Overview of disability inclusion – partners, good practices, challenges and needs

Partners

The Global Compact on Refugees, adopted by the UN General Assembly on 17 December 2018, states that: “In recognition of their important work for refugees, as well as host States and communities, and in a spirit of partnership, civil society organizations, including those that are led by refugees, women, youth or persons with disabilities, and those operating at the local and national levels, will contribute to assessing community strengths and needs, inclusive and accessible planning and programme implementation, and capacity development, as applicable.”

UNHCR has been promoting partnerships with Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (DPOs) for a number of years. At the global and regional level, DPOs have been important advocates for displaced people, while at a local level they provide important support in building the capacity of UNHCR and partners, including providing peer support and information on local services, among other activities.

UNHCR is also working closely with partners to promote disability inclusion in the processes leading up to the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) in December 2019. The GRF provides an important opportunity to strengthen partnerships with States and humanitarian and development partners, in particular on the inclusion of refugees with disabilities in national systems such as social protection, including pensions and health, building on the progress already made on this front.

Key partners of UNHCR on disability inclusion are Finland, the UK and Australia. Another key partner is the International Disability Alliance (IDA), a global network of organizations of persons with disabilities, as well as Humanity and Inclusion (HI). Their efforts in support of refugees, other forcibly displaced people and for the work of UNHCR have included a series of regional consultations with organizations of persons with disabilities, and development of guidance on disability, inclusive of pledges and contributions ahead of the GRF.

Good practices

There are numerous practical examples from refugee operations around the globe that exemplify UNHCR’s commitment to the inclusion of people with disabilities.

- 1 UNHCR has a strong focus on participation by persons with disabilities in decision-making and community leadership processes. For example, in Turkey one refugee council organized by UNHCR in Ankara consisted of nearly 50 per cent refugees with disabilities.
- 2 Another important focus for UNHCR is on ensuring equal access to information, feedback and complaints mechanisms for persons with disabilities, including those with intellectual, hearing or visual impairments. For example, in Myanmar, UNHCR modified feedback mechanisms to reach isolated people and those with literacy barriers, as often experienced by persons with disabilities who are excluded from education.
- 3 In line with the objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees and its Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, in Moldova, UNHCR is advocating for the inclusion of all persons of concern, including those with disabilities, in the national health insurance system.
- 4 UNHCR is developing capacity in the field on identification of persons with disabilities as critical to monitor their access to protection and assistance and to plan an inclusive response. For example in Malaysia, UNHCR trained 54 NGOs, as a result of which a 51 per cent increase was recorded in the identification of persons with disabilities in comparison to 2016.



Ester Barboza (centre), a 17-year-old girl from Venezuela, relaxes with her parents, Alexandra Sanchez and Johnny Barboza, and her young brother, Abraham, at the Casa del Abuelo shelter in Riohacha, Colombia.

Esther has been blind since she was three, and fled Venezuela with her parents and siblings because of the lack of medical care. The family lived on the streets before the shelter took them in.

© UNHCR/Andrew McConnell



Bawk Ra is a young woman who lost the ability to walk when she was five. She has been living in displacement since 2011 and is currently living in an IDP camp in Kachin State, in the northern part of Myanmar.

Since 2017, UNHCR has been partnering with professional photographers to provide a 12-day masterclass on photo story telling for persons with physical and/or psychosocial/intellectual impairments and their caregivers in the camp. The project aims to empower displaced people with disabilities by giving them the skills, confidence, and opportunity to tell their own stories and advocate for their own needs. The project also involves caregivers and frontline humanitarian workers to raise awareness of disability and the challenges associated with it. Since 2017, some 75 internally displaced persons with disabilities have participated in this project.

In February 2019, following her participation in the masterclass on photo story telling delivered through the UNHCR project, Bawk Ra was selected to compete in the Yangon Photo Festival, the largest photography festival in South East Asia and won the third prize in the “emerging photographers” category. Later this year, she assisted photo-training workshops for other displaced persons living with a disability in IDP camps in Kachin.

“Because of the wheelchair I received from UNHCR I was able to participate in the photo training and I learned how to take photos. I also had the chance to visit Yangon for the first time and was proud to win a prize at the Photo Festival. I am very happy and thankful for the assistance”.

© Courtesy of Bawk Ra

Operational Challenges

- 1 Under-identification of persons with disabilities presents a significant challenge to monitoring their access to protection and assistance and to planning an inclusive response. At the Global Disability Summit in 2018, UNHCR committed to improving identification of persons with disabilities through incorporating the Washington Group questions into continuous registration processes.* UNHCR is working to advance on this commitment, including through the development of accompanying guidance for registration staff on identification and recording of disability data.
- 2 There is also a need to strengthen the collection and use of reliable data and information on persons of concern with disabilities, including on their access to protection, assistance and solutions. In order to enhance UNHCR's capacity to monitor and report on access and inclusion and to systematically identify gaps and good practices, the new UNHCR results-based management system will require as a minimum data collected by UNHCR and its partners to be disaggregated by age, gender and disability.
- 3 Continuous investment is required to build the capacity of UNHCR, forcibly displaced people and partner staff, including at sectoral level on issues of disability inclusion. In 2019, two new resources on working with Persons with Disabilities in Forced Displacement have been released: an e-learning on Working with Persons with Disabilities in Forced Displacement, developed jointly with the Women's Refugee Commission; and a revised "Need to Know Guidance" developed jointly with the International Rescue Committee, Humanity & Inclusion, and Under the Same Sun.



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