

PANEL DISCUSSION ON DISASTER RESILIENCE AND DISABILITY: ENSURING EQUALITY AND INCLUSION

10 October 2013, United Nations Headquarters

SUMMARY

The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR) and the Department for Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) convened the first-ever panel discussion on disaster resilience and disability at the United Nations, in observance of the 2013 International Day for Disaster Reduction and as an opportunity to contribute to the discussions on a post-2015 framework for disaster risk reduction (or HFA2).¹

Key findings and recommendations

1. Disability perspectives and concerns should be included in the global development agenda and frameworks, including the emerging post-2015 framework for disaster risk reduction (HFA2);
2. Actions should and can be taken now to include persons with disabilities in disaster risk reduction and resilience building; it does not need to and cannot wait for the post-2015 development agenda;
3. An approach that engages the whole community is needed, one that includes persons with disabilities and necessitates steps to ensure equal access and support to engage in the design and implementation of resilient societies;
4. Targeted and disability sensitive and responsive actions and plans are needed to build and support the resilience of persons with disabilities. These plans and actions should be developed and implemented in a way that fully takes into account the inputs, needs and requirements of persons with disabilities through working with persons with disabilities and their representative organizations;
5. Evidence-based information and accurate data on the situation of persons with disabilities are lacking, and are needed for successful planning, policy and decision-making, and implementation; and
6. Education and raising awareness offer multiple benefits for all, not merely persons with disabilities who account for 1 billion persons or 15 percent of the world population.

In reference to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilitiesⁱⁱ (CRPD) and the first-ever high-level meeting on disability and development at the General Assembly, H.E. **Geir O. Pedersen**, Permanent Representative of Norway to the United Nations and co-chair of the panel, called for action and commitments on disability and disaster risk reduction to be embedded in the post-2015 development agenda, including in a post-2015 framework for disaster risk reduction (HFA2). Reflecting on how disasters affect persons with disabilities, he called for the development of practical solutions to ensure persons with disabilities can be actively involved in building resilience. He concluded by reaffirming Norway's full commitment to realizing the human rights of persons with disabilities, including in humanitarian and development efforts.

H.E. **Yusra Khan**, Deputy Permanent Representative of the Republic of Indonesia to the United Nations and co-chair of the panel, stated that despite progress in mainstreaming disaster risk reduction into aspects of economic and social development, the inclusion and participation of certain segments within societies, particularly young people, women, persons with disabilities

and senior citizens remained lacking. Reflecting on the Yogyakarta Outcome,ⁱⁱⁱ he called for a future disaster risk reduction framework to: (1) heighten awareness that neglect or exclusion of persons with disability increases the vulnerability of everyone; (2) support special efforts to ensure the full and effective participation and inclusion of persons with disabilities and their associates within disaster risk reduction planning, preparedness and response; and (3) provide options and ways to better incorporate the perspectives, needs and requirements of persons with disabilities in the post-2015 framework for disaster risk reduction. He also highlighted the importance of partnership among States and all major stakeholders "to ensure the next global development framework will address the inclusion of disability".

Thomas Gass, Assistant Secretary-General for Policy Coordination and Inter-Agency Affairs of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, highlighted that disability has been largely invisible in internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals. However, he welcomed the mainstreaming of disability in discussions on the post-2015 development framework, which is recognized as



vital, if the new development goals are to be inclusive, sustainable and achievable. Similarly, he noted the growing consensus that incorporating climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction in the emerging development agenda will provide an opportunity to advance sustainable and resilient development. Reflecting on the General Assembly's high-level meeting on disability and development, held at its sixty-eighth session, he highlighted that the Outcome Document^{iv} underlines the importance of including disability in the post-2015 development agenda and calls for urgent action, including in the area of strengthening preparedness and disaster risk reduction. The challenge now is to ensure its full implementation on the ground.

The Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction, **Margareta Wahlström**, emphasized that disability is not an issue solely for persons with a disability, or for disability organizations, but rather an issue for all. She underscored that the work of persons with disabilities on disaster risk reduction, including preparedness, inclusion and access, benefits all. Reflecting on the interim findings on a UN survey^v on disability and disasters, she highlighted that 70 per cent of respondents are not aware of emergency planning in their community. Some 50 per cent said they wanted to be involved in designing plans, 20 per cent did not know, and only a small percentage said they did not want to be involved. These figures suggest that many persons with disabilities feel isolated. This provides an entry point for an important conversation and mobilization opportunity.

Kerryann Ifill, President of the Senate of Barbados, noted that Article 11 of the CRPD obligates States Parties to take measures to include the needs and protections of persons with disability in disaster reduction efforts. In light of this provision, she called for the full participation and inclusion of persons with disabilities in its implementation. Barbados' approach has included the establishment of a 'vulnerable persons'

committee, specific training for first responders and volunteers on how to interact with the disability community, and efforts by civil society to raise public awareness of persons with disabilities and disasters. She noted that all of this required a legislative framework and political will to ensure effective implementation of a number of strategies, including early warning, information dissemination, access to shelters and other services and participation in planning and execution. Integrating disability considerations at the design phase doesn't generally incur additional cost. However, retrofitting does. While there are limitations, the aim must be to reach everyone. Engaging the whole community is the only way to achieve resilient societies.

The General Secretary of the Japanese Federation of the Deaf, **Mitsuji Hisamatsu**, provided an overview of the Great East Japan earthquake and tsunami. He highlighted that the death rate for persons with disability was double that of the general population. In some places the rate was as high as five times, due to a lack of information or an accessible means to evacuate. To build a resilient society, he outlined three key lessons from Japan's experience: (1) the need for specific guidelines and measures to support persons with disabilities; (2) the need for accurate data and information on where and how persons with disability are living and what they need to reduce their risk; and (3) the need to raise awareness on the necessity of disaster risk reduction and to strengthen disaster preparedness. Learning from each other, both at the government and community level can support genuine change and action. Disaster risk reduction education provides long-term benefits, including transferring knowledge to parents. Mainstreaming disability consideration into education can support the entire community, and does not have an additional cost.

Alex Robinson, Country Director of Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund (ASB) in Indonesia and a co-founder of the Disability-Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction Network for Asia and the Pacific,^{vi} expressed the view that the disaster risk reduction community, as a whole, has not engaged with disability and the disability movement has not engaged with disaster risk reduction. He attributed this lack of engagement, in part, to the widely held view that disability is a technical issue. He noted that over the years disability has been ring-fenced as the preserve of the technical few and, effectively, as being someone else's problem. He



outlined that disability is inherent to the human condition and is the concern of all. He stated that information on choices or action to take is often not available to persons with disability. To overcome this, focus should not be given to the content, which is often the same, but rather how to better deliver that information. He noted that improving information delivery does not require significantly increased investment, rather a little bit of creativity, imagination and willingness. Given that disasters have a disproportionate impact on persons with disabilities, this can only be addressed through a ‘whole of community’ approach. Moving away from the issue of vulnerability and looking at resilience is also important to supporting an inclusive approach. NGOs have a key role to play to bridge the gaps between disaster risk reduction and disability.

Youth representative and member of the Deaf Art Community, **Stephanie Rahardja**, shared her experience of the 2006 Yogyakarta earthquake. She reflected on the absence of information for persons with disabilities to save themselves. She highlighted her work with different forms of media to raise awareness and disseminate knowledge on managing disaster risks. She underscored that participation in disaster risk reduction was every person’s right. Governments and civil society need to look at how to increase the potential of persons with disabilities to engage and contribute. Clear data and targeted education is needed, both for persons with disabilities but also for the wider community. Persons with disabilities can play an important role in increasing a community’s resilience. Action needs to be taken now.

A number of Member States and civil society organisations took the floor. The **United Arab Emirates** called for greater engagement and support of persons with disabilities, and

particularly of women. **Australia** highlighted the importance of bringing the disability and disaster risk reduction communities together, and urged Member States and others not to wait for the post-2015 development agenda, including the HFA2, to ensure the inclusion of persons with disabilities in all aspects of development, including disaster resilience. **New Zealand**, noting that disability as an issue has gained increasing attention in both the humanitarian and development spheres at the United Nations over the last year, sees an opportunity to further raise the profile of disaster risk reduction. The **United States** called for a ‘whole of community’ approach to disaster risk reduction, which includes persons with disabilities. Community participation means equal access, and support for this engagement.

The **Huairou Commission** underscored that disaster risk reduction is primarily a community activity, hence the importance of inclusion, particularly for women. **Ribbon International** underscored that disaster risk reduction is not solely an issue for the Global South, and efforts must be taken across the world. Community awareness is central to addressing issues of isolation. **UNICEF** highlighted the mindset that prevents inclusion – that it costs too much, or that it’s too difficult – as being tantamount to saying that persons with disabilities are of less value than persons without disabilities. Given that half of persons with disabilities that die in a disaster are children, particular focus must be given to children. **WHO** recognised that the most effective way to achieve public health outcomes, including as it relates to disaster risk reduction and disability, is through strong local and national capacities, including technical materials.

The panel discussion can be viewed online:
<http://webtv.un.org/meetings-events/watch/disaster-resilience-and-disability-ensuring-equality-and-inclusion-panel-discussion/2735563739001>

ⁱ <http://www.unisdr.org/we/coordinate/hfa-post2015>
ⁱⁱ <http://www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?navid=14&pid=150>
ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.preventionweb.net/english/professional/policies/v.php?id=29332>
^{iv} http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/68/L.1
^v <http://www.unisdr.org/archive/35032>
^{vi} <http://www.didrn.net/home/>