# Challenges Faced by Persons with Disabilities during Disasters

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# Abstract

# The primary objectives of this article are to identify the challenges faced by disabled individuals during disasters. Disasters can lead to enduring injuries and impairments while exacerbating existing conditions due to lost equipment or medication. People with disabilities are often portrayed as a vulnerable and heterogeneous group when facing disasters. Disabilities can be categorized into several types, including physical, visual, auditory, speech, cognitive, and psycho-social. However, even individuals with seemingly similar disabilities may experience diverse challenges, necessitating a nuanced understanding of their varied needs. The article relies on secondary data and thorough analysis of selected global reports to gain insight into the research issues. The active participation of individuals with disabilities in risk management remains insufficient, despite its potential to enhance disaster preparedness and response. Greater involvement of people with disabilities in planning and decision-making processes can help mitigate their vulnerabilities. A human rights-based approach to disability recognizes individuals with disabilities as rights-holders with the ability to advocate for equitable participation in society. Therefore, a paradigm shift in institutional strategies and practices is necessary, particularly in regions lacking robust anti-discrimination laws and disability-inclusive disaster management policies.

# Keywords: Disabilities, risk of death, mortality, risk management

# Introduction

Approximately 15% of the global population is living with some form of disability; in times of emergencies, they often face neglect and experience elevated rates of mortality and morbidity. Additionally, during disasters, individuals with disabilities are less likely to receive timely warnings; they struggle to locate evacuation routes and accessible public shelters; adequate care and shelter services are frequently inadequate; and they remain invisible in terms of relief and recovery efforts, resulting in a heightened risk of death, injury, and property loss. Article 11 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities emphasizes that States Parties must take “all necessary measures to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk, including armed conflict, humanitarian emergencies, and natural disasters.” More than 160 states and regional organizations have signed this convention, which is shaping national disaster legislation in numerous countries. The majority of individuals with disabilities are impoverished, socially isolated, and excluded from decision-making processes.

Disasters can lead to enduring injuries and impairments while exacerbating existing conditions due to lost equipment or medication. People with disabilities are often portrayed as a vulnerable and heterogeneous group when facing disasters. Their increased risk during such events results from the interaction between their injuries, the physical and social environment, institutional arrangements, and societal attitudes. While policies often address these issues, disaster organizations tend to prioritize helping individuals with disabilities adapt to their circumstances rather than modifying the environment to meet their needs. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), there are one billion individuals globally living with some form of disability. Despite their significant numbers, there is still a scarcity of statistical data regarding disabilities, especially in disaster contexts. Many of these individuals contend with escalating disaster risks and threats; they remain largely invisible, highly vulnerable to danger, and more likely to suffer death or injury during disasters than their non-disabled counterparts. This article aims to highlight the risks that individuals with disabilities face during natural disasters.

# Methodology

The primary objectives of this article are to identify the challenges faced by disabled individuals during disasters. The article relies on secondary data and thorough analysis of selected global reports to gain insight into the research issues. It developed themes, concepts, and comparisons based on the chosen articles and reports.

# Global Policy Frameworks

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| **Name of the policy** | **Aims and Objectives of Policy** | **Year** |
| Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities | Article 11 is of particular relevance for disability-inclusive Disaster Risk Management | 2008 |
| Sustainable Development goals | Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. It also identifies at-risk populations, including women, children, older persons, and  persons with disabilities. | 2015 |
| Sendai framework for disaster risk reduction 2015–2030 | Guiding principles Para. (19)(d) and (g) : “Disaster risk reduction requires an all-of-society engagement and partnership. It also requires a multi-hazard approach and inclusive risk-informed decision-making based on the open exchange and dissemination of disaggregated data, including by sex, age and disability. | 2015 |
| World Humanitarian  Summit | Charter for Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action. | 2016 |
| Dhaka declaration on disability and disaster risk management | Identified relatively higher rates of mortality experienced by persons with disabilities compared with other community members. Highlighting the importance of the active contribution of persons with disabilities and DPOs | 2017 |
| World Bank Regulatory Frameworks | Disability-Inclusion and Accountability Framework. | 2018 |

**Challenges Faced by Individuals with Disabilities in Disaster Contexts**

Individuals with disabilities encounter distinct and multifaceted challenges during disasters. Disabilities can be categorized into several types, including physical, visual, auditory, speech, cognitive, and psycho-social. However, even individuals with seemingly similar disabilities may experience diverse challenges, necessitating a nuanced understanding

of their varied needs. Recognizing the heterogeneity within the disability community is crucial for effective disaster management and risk reduction.

# Identification Challenges

A fundamental issue faced by individuals with disabilities is their lack of identification before, during, and after disasters. Many remain unrecognized in emergency response efforts due to the absence of comprehensive data collection and systematic identification mechanisms. Consequently, their needs are often overlooked, leading to heightened vulnerabilities during evacuation and recovery phases. The exclusion from disaster preparedness initiatives results in barriers to accessing essential services such as food, water, shelter, and clothing, particularly for unregistered individuals.

# Representation in Disaster Management

The lack of representation of individuals with disabilities in disaster preparedness and response mechanisms remains a significant concern. They are frequently excluded from emergency risk management planning, community engagement, and decision-making roles. Governments often fail to incorporate disabled individuals into long-term recovery and risk- reduction initiatives. Additionally, coordination structures lack adequate representation of disability-related concerns, impeding the dissemination of crucial information and hindering effective disaster response.

# Discrimination and Marginalization

Societal discrimination and marginalization further exacerbate the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities during disasters. These individuals frequently encounter obstacles in accessing emergency assistance and protection due to systemic barriers and discriminatory practices. Relief distribution centers, and crucial information on aid and resources may not be communicated in formats accessible to individuals with hearing, visual, or cognitive impairments. These pre-existing discriminatory practices often persist into the recovery phase, reinforcing exclusion and vulnerability.

# Necessity for Specific Support

The unique needs of individuals with disabilities necessitate targeted support during emergencies. Many require specific items such as additional clothing for those susceptible to cold, medical devices like catheters for individuals with spinal cord injuries, or essential medications for managing conditions such as epilepsy. Without proper allocation of infrastructure, human resources, and financial investments, effectively addressing these needs remains a challenge.

# Gaps in Knowledge and Skills

Another critical challenge is the insufficient knowledge and preparedness of emergency personnel in engaging effectively with individuals with disabilities. Many first responders and volunteers lack the confidence, training, and skills to identify, register, and assist disabled individuals in crisis situations. Additionally, caregivers may not possess the necessary information or expertise to provide effective support during emergencies. Communication barriers and negative societal perceptions further hinder appropriate prioritization and assistance during disaster response efforts.

# Limited Engagement in Risk Management

The active participation of individuals with disabilities in risk management remains insufficient, despite its potential to enhance disaster preparedness and response. Greater involvement of people with disabilities in planning and decision-making processes can help mitigate their vulnerabilities. There is an opportunity to strengthen engagement through accessible resources, collaboration with disabled people’s organizations (DPOs), self-help initiatives, and capacity-building programs for healthcare personnel.

# Strategies for Improvement

* To address these challenges, securing sustainable funding is imperative to expand disability-inclusive services at the local level and establish comprehensive policies at the national level. Healthcare personnel and volunteers should receive specialized training, incorporating practical demonstrations to enhance their competency in managing individuals with disabilities during emergencies.
* Given the multidisciplinary nature of emergency risk management, effective coordination is required across various sectors, including community, sub-national,

national, and international levels. Additionally, disability-related concerns should be systematically integrated into all phases of disaster risk management evaluations.

* Communication strategies, including risk messaging, evacuation procedures, and response measures, must be accessible to individuals with disabilities.

The design and development of healthcare facilities, shelters, and housing should prioritize accessibility to ensure safety, security, and social inclusion.

# Conclusion

This analysis highlights the significant barriers faced by individuals with disabilities during disasters and underscores the necessity of integrating disability-inclusive strategies into disaster risk management. Furthermore, global frameworks concerning disability and disaster resilience should inform policy development. A comprehensive, multi-modal warning system tailored to the needs of individuals with disabilities is essential for enhancing emergency preparedness. The continued marginalization of individuals with disabilities raises critical human rights and social justice concerns. A human rights-based approach to disability recognizes individuals with disabilities as rights-holders with the ability to advocate for equitable participation in society. Therefore, a paradigm shift in institutional strategies and practices is necessary, particularly in regions lacking robust anti-discrimination laws and disability-inclusive disaster management policies.

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