

Disability and disaster risk

Alex Robinson PhD¹

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Background

Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) is an umbrella term that includes the reduction of existing risk and the prevention of future risk prior to, during, and following disasters. DRR can be considered the objective of Disaster Risk Management.² Contemporary DRR encompasses natural and human-induced hazards; biological hazards, such as COVID-19; and hydrometeorological hazards and climate risk. When our efforts to manage disaster risk fall short, humanitarian response becomes the option of last resort. Preventing disasters, crises, and pandemics from happening is the core concern of DRR.

Disability and disaster risk

It is only recently that disability inclusion has been prioritised in DRR. This is despite well-established understandings of the relationship between disability and risk in general. For example, we know people with disabilities are at increased risk of poverty, lower educational attainment, and poorer health outcomes compared to people without disabilities. Regardless, prior to 2015 there was limited engagement by the DRR community. Engagement with disability inclusion was further curtailed by claims of insufficient evidence to warrant the allocation of resources. These claims ran counter to some fundamental DRR truths. We know people with disabilities experience barriers and, as a result, increased risk of exclusion and inequity. Disasters, by definition, disrupt the fabric of societies and create more barriers. This increases the risk of loss, damage, injury, and death for marginalised individuals and groups as well as contributing to disability. We now have the evidence. We know that disaster risk, including the impacts of climate change, is disproportionately higher for people with disabilities.^{3,4,5,6}

¹ Nossal Institute for Global Health, University of Melbourne. alex.robinson@unimelb.edu.au With thanks to Karen Alexander, CBM IAG for review.

² United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. 2017. Sendai Framework Terminology on Disaster Risk Reduction. <https://www.undrr.org/terminology>

³ Fujii K. 2015. The Great East Japan Earthquake and Disabled Persons. Background to their High Mortality Rate. https://www.dinf.ne.jp/doc/english/twg/escap_121031/fujii.html

⁴ Benigno M R, Kleinitz P, Calina L, Alcida R, Gohy B, and Hall J L. 2015. Responding to the Health and Rehabilitation Needs of People with Disabilities post-Haiyan. WHO Field Investigation Report. <https://ojs.wpro.who.int/ojs/index.php/wpsar/article/view/357>

⁵ Doocy S, Robinson C, Moodie C, and Burham G. 2009. Tsunami-related Injury in Aceh Province, Indonesia. Global Public Health 4(2) pp.205-214. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441690802472612>

⁶ Pacific Disability Forum. 2022. Disability and climate change in the Pacific. Findings from Kiribati, Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu. <https://pacificdisability.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/PDF-Final-Report-on-Climate-Change-and-Persons-with-Disabilities.pdf>

There have been three global DRR frameworks (Yokohama, Hyogo, and Sendai) that have shaped how we anticipate and respond to disaster risk. We have moved from single hazard approaches to recognise multiple hazards and cascading and compounding risk. The 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake is illustrative, with an earthquake triggered tsunami leading to failure of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear reactors. Our language has also evolved and NATECH, or Natural Hazards Triggering Technological Accidents, are now a policy concern. COVID-19 also transported the language of preparedness, response, and ‘building back better’ into our homes. Borrowing from the financial sector, we now recognise that disaster risk can be systemic. Systemic risk refers to risks characterised by uncertainty, multiple origins, and complexity making systemic risk hard, or impossible, to predict.⁷ To manage systemic risk, traditional approaches based on rigid or prescriptive preparedness and contingency plans are likely to be of limited use.

There are parallels between how we understand disaster risk and disability. The Social Model of disability explains it is how societies organise themselves that creates disability, inequity, and exclusion. Foundational to contemporary DRR is the recognition that disasters are not natural. Nor are they part of an inevitable and unbreakable cycle of disaster event, response, recovery, and attempting to be better prepared the next time around. Disasters are preventable and, just like disability exclusion, arise because of the choices we make as individuals and societies.

Opportunities and challenges

Commitments and stalled progress

The Hyogo Framework for Action 2005 to 2015 made one passing reference to ‘the disabled’. This was followed by Article 11 on ‘Situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies’ of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), 2006. From a contemporary viewpoint, Article 11 reads like something of an afterthought and does not fully reflect the preventative stance promoted in Hyogo. Just as disability inclusion was not sufficiently prioritised by the DRR community, Article 11 is a product of a time when DRR was not high on the disability community’s agenda. At the time of writing, an interpretive General Comment on Article 11 is being drafted. Despite the benefits of a more preventative approach to disaster risk and the accelerated impacts of climate change, inputs to the CRPD Committee remain largely focused on improving disability inclusion in humanitarian response.⁸ The General Comment on Article 11 presents an important opportunity to refocus attention on ‘situations of risk’ more broadly and align with contemporary DRR understandings.

Despite a sluggish start, the DRR community has embraced a disability inclusive approach – on paper at least. The Sendai Framework for DRR 2015 to 2030 emphasises disability inclusion, accessibility, and includes designated roles for disability stakeholders. However, at the mid-point of Sendai, progress is behind expectations. The Mid-term Review of the Sendai Framework (MTR) finds member states are not on track to substantially reduce disaster mortality, the number of disaster-affected people, and disaster losses and damage by 2030.⁹ Participation of people with disabilities in DRR processes remains low, and people with disabilities and other marginalised groups continue to be excluded from early warning and recovery. Pacific contributions to the MTR report a lack of resourcing for disability inclusion and the ongoing need to translate national policies into local

⁷ United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. 2019. Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction. Chapter 2: Systemic risks, the Sendai Framework and the 2030 Agenda. <https://gar.undrr.org/chapters/chapter-2-systemic-risks-sendai-framework-and-2030-agenda.html>

⁸ See: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2023/day-general-discussion-and-call-written-submissions-article-11-convention>

⁹ United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. 2023. The Report of the Midterm Review of the Implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030. <https://www.undrr.org/publication/report-midterm-review-implementation-sendai-framework-disaster-risk-reduction-2015-2030>

action.¹⁰ A 2023 UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction study found little progress on participation by people with disabilities compared to 10 years earlier: worryingly, there were indications we may be moving backwards on some metrics.¹¹

We now have substantive commitments to disability inclusive DRR, humanitarian action, and climate change at the global level. Global frameworks, alongside CRPD commitments, are being translated into national and sub-national policies and legislation. However, initiatives to increase the participation of people with disabilities in DRR programs are often limited in scale. Disability inclusion is too frequently more characteristic of an ‘add-on’ than a comprehensive and integrated approach. Despite this, the growth of small scale initiatives indicates awareness and an incremental response to changing societal expectations. It is also the case that people with disabilities and organisations of people with disabilities (OPDs) are taking action and filling gaps left by government and other DRR stakeholders. Initiatives by, and partnerships with, OPDs are important, but they should not divert attention from the duty of governments and DRR actors to deliver on inclusion and equity. While we are seeing examples of progress, they are islands amidst a wider sea of inertia. Disability inclusion initiatives continue to be under-prioritised and under-resourced and tied to short term projects with limited potential for sustainability or replicability: this limits opportunities for learning and fostering institutional change.

Understanding disaster risk

Sendai Framework Priority 1 on ‘understanding disaster risk’ provides a point of reference for considering disability inclusion. The intention is that a solid understanding of disaster risk, including the collection and use of data, is a prerequisite for effective prevention, preparedness, and response. The need to better understand disaster risk reminds us of the importance of reflection and evaluating actions and their impacts. This should not, however, become an excuse to repurpose old learnings as new knowledge. Understanding disaster risk must go beyond recognition of the disproportionate impact disasters have on people with disabilities and the need for accessible services and infrastructure. This was well-known, and advocated for, before Sendai. Today, it is hard to explain an inaccessible shelter or early warning system as a lack of understanding rather than an ongoing lack of prioritisation. Interventions that wilfully exclude, generate disaster risk for and within communities and run counter to fundamental DRR principles and the 2030 Agenda commitment to leave no one behind. Again, disability inclusion and exclusion are about the choices we make.

The theme of understanding disaster risk suggests areas for improvement. This includes the observation that guidance on disability inclusion has changed little over almost two decades – this is not specific to DRR. This guidance was developed to raise awareness and outline principles that could be generally applied. In principle, applying a twin-track approach, partnering with OPDs, and collecting disability disaggregated data are sound. However, when considered against how understandings of disaster risk have developed over the same period and the emergence of increasingly specialised sub-sectors, they seem overly generic and lacking in nuance. At worst, guidance on disability-inclusive DRR has stagnated. Relatedly, considerations of people with complex support needs in DRR have not substantively progressed.¹²

¹⁰ United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. 2023. Midterm Review of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030. Thematic Report on Disability Inclusion in Disaster Risk Reduction in the Pacific. <https://www.undrr.org/publication/thematic-report-disability-inclusion-pacific>

¹¹ United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. 2023. Global Survey on Persons with Disabilities and Disasters. <https://www.undrr.org/report/2023-gobal-survey-report-on-persons-with-disabilities-and-disasters>

¹² For an Australian example of preparedness to address individual support needs see: <https://collaborating4inclusion.org/home/pcep/>

While general guidance was needed to raise awareness and generate buy-in for disability inclusion pre-Sendai, by its nature such guidance oversimplifies and obscures complexity. An unintended consequence is efforts to understand disaster risk have not addressed the elevated risk that people with complex impairments and high support needs experience. Recalibrating our perspectives to recognise both the complexity of disaster risk and of disability will require new approaches and solutions. For example, a rigid emphasis on personal preparedness may not be immediately helpful for individuals that rely on others to complete activities of daily living. Identifying and addressing complex needs also requires a rethink of one-size-fits-all approaches to disability data collection and use. While a proponent of the considered use of the Washington Group questions in DRR programming, there is reason for concern when one tool is considered the solution to all disability data needs.¹³ Addressing complexity will also require new partnerships, collaborations, and access to expertise.

Looking ahead to 2030

Moving ahead there is a clear need to ensure disability inclusion in DRR is prioritised. This need is accelerated by growing climate risk. DRR legislation, including legislation relating to CRPD ratification, increasingly recognises the importance of including people with disabilities. It is no longer enough to simply consider disability inclusion in DRR as a moral prerogative or an issue for voluntary reporting under the Sendai Framework. Disability inclusion needs to be recognised as a legal requirement by decision makers, leaders, and managers. Organisations that do not ensure disability inclusion will increasingly face the institutional and reputational risks of non-compliance.¹⁴ Prioritisation also requires the allocation of resources.

An important advocacy message in the run up to Sendai was that disability inclusion should not be viewed as an ‘extra cost’. Instead, disability inclusion should be considered the cost of doing DRR properly and DRR interventions that exclude persons with disabilities underestimate the true costs of doing business. It is hard to identify budget allocations to disability inclusive DRR, but there are indications they remain woefully inadequate.¹⁵ We continue to be constrained by the view that disability inclusion in DRR is one more focus area competing for funds, time, and resources. It is time to properly acknowledge that disability is a cross-cutting risk multiplier that increases disaster risk for people of all genders, ages, and social standing. Prioritising disability inclusion in DRR does not detract from other priorities and work – it elevates and enhances them.

Prioritisation of disability inclusion in DRR is evidently needed by 2030. On the one hand, we need to move to scale and expand coverage of standard, or established, disability inclusive practice. In this regard, there is little mystery – we know what needs to be done. However, driving this forward will require clearer direction and signposting from donors and host governments, including ensuring the legislative compliance of in-country programming and investments. On the other hand, we need to progress conversations and embrace complexity. Standardised solutions have a role to play, but they should not be mistaken for comprehensive solutions that address the diverse needs of all people with disabilities, particularly those with complex and high support needs. Just as the wider DRR community is grappling with the challenges of systemic risk, we need to become more comfortable with complexity in the design of disability inclusive DRR solutions. Growing interest in anticipatory action is a case in point and raises questions of the coverage of social protection, the inclusiveness of

¹³ Robinson A, Nguyen L, and Smith F. 2021. Use of the Washington Group Questions in Non-Government Programming. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18(12). <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/18/21/11143>

¹⁴ Weibgen A A. 2015. The Right to be Rescued: Disability Justice in an Age of Disaster. Yale Law Journal. <https://www.yalelawjournal.org/note/the-right-to-be-rescued>

¹⁵ United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. 2023. Midterm Review of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030. Thematic Report on Disability Inclusion in Disaster Risk Reduction in the Pacific. <https://www.undrr.org/publication/thematic-report-disability-inclusion-pacific>

financial service providers, the need for contextualised disability data solutions for targeting, and consideration of the additional financial costs of disability.¹⁶

The commitment made in 2015 to leave no one behind signalled our ambition and is a call to action. By 2030, we need to have demonstrated we have done more than continued to raise awareness on the importance of disability inclusive DRR.

¹⁶ For a brief introduction see United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Anticipatory Action. <https://www.unocha.org/anticipatory-action#:~:text=Anticipatory%20action%20is%20now%20commonly,impacts%20before%20they%20fully%20unfold>.