



ADVOCACY ISSUE BRIEF:
INCLUSIVE HUMANITARIAN ACTION



Executive Summary

Despite legal obligations under international law (like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) among others), persons with disabilities are still left behind in humanitarian action. They are disproportionately affected by armed conflicts, increasing climate hazards and economic disadvantage.

In humanitarian contexts, the number of persons with disabilities is often higher than the global average of 16%.

Our work on disability inclusion in humanitarian contexts applies a rights-based approach. Light for the World is committed to consulting and supporting other humanitarian actors in making their emergency response efforts more inclusive.

This Advocacy Issue Brief outlines the main barriers to disability inclusion and presents our approach to overcome them. Additionally, it gives recommendations to expert audiences and relevant stakeholders like policymakers on how to make humanitarian action more inclusive.

Inclusive humanitarian action means that persons with disabilities are included in the design, planning and implementation of all humanitarian programmes.

Introduction

As conflicts persist and the climate crisis intensifies, the impact falls disproportionately on lower income countries, where communities face increasingly frequent emergencies and humanitarian systems remain under strain. Eighty percent of persons with disabilities worldwide live in lower income countries¹. Women and girls with disabilities experience discrimination in all areas of life, both because of their gender and because of their disabilities. This makes them particularly vulnerable to crises.

The aforementioned crises affect everyone, but persons with disabilities are particularly impacted due to higher poverty rates and because they are among the most excluded in disaster and emergency responses². This places them at significantly higher risk of violence and abuse³. The climate crisis further compounds these challenges by deepening poverty, reducing access to water, spreading disease and driving displacement and conflict. Addressing these interconnected issues requires more inclusive and effective humanitarian approaches.

1 UNDRR (2023): Global Survey Report on Persons with Disabilities and Disasters. Available: 2023 Global Survey Report on Persons with Disabilities and Disasters | UNDRR [accessed 03 February 2026]

2 UNDESA (2024): Accelerating the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals by, for and with persons with disabilities. Page 333. Available: UN Flagship Report on Disability and Development 2024 [accessed 03 February 2026]

3 *ibid.*, page 288.

Persons with disabilities are disproportionately affected in humanitarian emergencies

Around 16 % of the world's population experience significant disability⁴. In humanitarian contexts, the number of persons with disabilities is often higher than the global average. For example, in Cabo Delgado in Mozambique, we found in 2024 that persons with disabilities made up over 30 % of people affected⁵. According to the United Nations, persons with disabilities are disproportionately affected during or in the aftermath of disasters and, in some cases, face a mortality rate up to four times as high as others⁶. In 2025, 48 million persons with disabilities are estimated to be in need of humanitarian assistance⁷. A survey conducted by the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction in 2023 found that 24% — almost a quarter — of persons with disabilities surveyed worldwide are displaced. The most common reason is armed conflict or wide-spread violence (50%)⁸.

During the COVID-19-pandemic, half of the deaths related to the disease were persons with disabilities⁹. Furthermore, pandemics like COVID-19 increase the number of persons with disabilities globally as many survivors of diseases develop impairments. In addition, events like armed conflicts and the exposure to trauma can lead to survivors acquiring psychosocial impairments¹⁰ which are often neglected.



4 WHO (2023): Disability Fact Sheet. See: Disability. [accessed 02 February 2026]

5 UNOCHA (2024): Mozambique: humanitarian needs and response plan 2025. Page 33. Available: <https://reliefweb.int/report/mozambique/mozambique-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2025-december-2024> [accessed 02 February 2026]

6 UNDESA (2024): Disability and Development Report 2024. Page 333. Available: social.desa.un.org/sites/default/files/2025-09/DDR2024-Full-Report-Final.pdf [accessed 02 February 2026]

7 Disability Reference Group (2025): Call for Disability-Inclusive Humanitarian Commitments. Available: Call for Disability-Inclusive Humanitarian Commitments at GDS 2025 [accessed 02 February 2026]

8 UNDRR (2023): 2023 Global Survey Report on Persons with Disabilities and Disasters. Page 26. Available: undrr.org/media/90432/download?startDownload=20260129 [accessed 02 February 2026]

9 UNDESA (2024): Disability and Development Report 2024. Page 333. Available: social.desa.un.org/sites/default/files/2025-09/DDR2024-Full-Report-Final.pdf [accessed 02 February 2026]

10 Global Disability Summit Stakeholders (2025): Global Disability Inclusion Report. Page 129. Available: [GIPO3351-UNICEF-GDIR-Full-report_Proof-7.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/gdsummit/GDIR-Full-report_Proof-7.pdf) [accessed 02 February 2026]

Main barriers

Persons with disabilities face different kinds of barriers to access humanitarian services.

Institutional barriers include laws, policies, strategies or institutionalised practices.

Environmental barriers include physical obstacles and the lack of services.

Communication barriers hinder persons with disabilities to access information, restricting opportunities to participate. Finally, **attitudinal barriers** are negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities which lead to discrimination and exclusion.

Light for the World aims to remove all the above-mentioned barriers. For example, Light for the World trains and supports humanitarian actors as well as the disability movement to improve their understanding of disability inclusive humanitarian response. Furthermore, we disseminate inclusive information using braille and sign language.

In practice, persons with disabilities face a much higher difficulty of evacuation in emergency situations and are often — literally — left behind in humanitarian response. They face a heightened risk of injury and a lower chance of being rescued. The safe and timely evacuation of persons with disabilities is often severely challenged by a lack of an effective early warning system as well as an inaccessibility of infrastructure and transportation¹¹. An adequate and effective early warning system could significantly contribute to facilitating evacuation for persons with disabilities in emergency situations¹².

Persons with disabilities are often not included in preparing for emergencies

In most cases, there is a serious lack of preparedness plans for persons with disabilities. Most are not aware of national or local disaster risk reduction plans at all¹³. Additionally, consultations by governments are often insufficient. Light for the World advocates for meaningful participation to ensure that voices of persons with disabilities are seriously considered in decision-making process. Light for the World empowers persons with disabilities and Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) to take active roles in humanitarian response.

Early warning systems are often not accessible to persons with disabilities: they are not available in braille, sign language or other more accessible formats. The amplified marginalisation has even led to persons with disabilities being hospitalised or institutionalised during disasters which is in stark conflict with the UNCRPD. Shelters provided for people who flee from emergencies are not always accessible for refugees with disabilities due to multiple barriers. For example, physical accessibility difficulties for wheelchair or tricycle users or a lack of sign language communication.

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- 11 IDDC (2025): Unequal climate justice for persons with disabilities. Page 18. Available: Unequal climate justice for persons with disabilities. [accessed 02 February 2026]
 - 12 UNDRR (2023): Global Survey Report on Persons with disabilities and Disasters. Page 31. Available: GLOBAL SURVEY REPORT ON PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES AND DISASTERS 2023 [accessed 02 February 2026]
 - 13 UNDESA (2024): Disability and Development Report 2024. Page 47. Available: UN Flagship Report on Disability and Development 2024 [accessed 02 February 2026]

However, in Africa and the Pacific, significant progress has been made regarding the percentage of persons with disabilities involved in decision-making processes on community disaster management and risk reduction. From about 10% in 2013, the number doubled to about 20% in 2023¹⁴.

Violence against women and girls with disabilities is systemic and occurs more in humanitarian contexts

Considering intersectionality in the context of inclusive humanitarian action is crucial. According to the United Nations, sexualised violence in conflict zones increased by a quarter in 2024¹⁵. Multiple UN bodies have argued that violence against girls with disabilities is structural and systemic¹⁶. It occurs in all settings and is especially high during conflict. Sexualised violence is often used as a weapon and thus poses an additional threat to women with disabilities. In addition, women with disabilities face a greater risk of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)¹⁷ as well as abuse and sexualised exploitation¹⁸.

Severe lack of data

There is a severe lack of data when it comes to persons with disabilities in emergency response. Without reliable data, humanitarian actors cannot understand whom they are leaving behind. As the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has pointed out, the identification of those who are most excluded could help in establishing priorities and provide the opportunity to design actionable policies. Must-do-actions are needed. They include the collection and provision of data, meaningful participation and capacity strengthening, as well as identifying and removing barriers. States and global actors should prioritise those who are left behind.

14 *ibid*, pages 332-341.

15 UN News (2025): UN warns of steep rise in sexual violence during conflict. Available: UN warns of steep rise in sexual violence during conflict | UN News [accessed 02 February 2026]

16 UNICEF, UN Women, WHO, ILO, FAO, UNDP, UNFPA, UNPRPD (2023): Working together to ensure the rights of girls with disabilities to live free from violence. Page 4. Available: Working together to ensure the right of girls with disabilities to live free from violence [accessed 02 February 2026]

17 García-Cuellar MM, Pastor-Moreno G, Ruiz-Pérez I, Henares-Montiel J. (2023): The prevalence of intimate partner violence against women with disabilities: a systematic review of the literature. *Disabil. Rehabil.* 2023 Jan;45(1):1-8. Available: The prevalence of intimate partner violence against women with disabilities: a systematic review of the literature - PubMed [accessed 02 February 2026]

18 UN Women (2025): Advancing Disability and Gender Inclusion in Humanitarian Action and Recovery. Page 1. Available: Advancing-Disability-and-Gender-Inclusion-in-Humanitarian-Action_Tipsheet.pdf [accessed 02 February 2026]

States are legally obligated to protect persons with disabilities in conflict and disaster situations

States are legally obligated under international humanitarian law to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk, including armed conflict, humanitarian emergencies and disasters caused by natural hazards¹⁹. Furthermore, human rights law is applicable to **all** citizens of the concerned state without any discrimination of persons with disabilities.

All actions we support at Light for the World adhere to and align with internationally recognised standards and guidelines, especially the following legal documents:

- ▶ Article 11 of the CRPD,
- ▶ the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Guidelines on the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action including the Must-Do-Actions (MDAs).

Our work

Light for the World is an expert-organisation focused on disability rights and eye health, with a mandate of shaping humanitarian action efforts in an inclusive way. We provide accessible and inclusive strategies to save lives. Light for the World follows a rights-based approach and adheres to the Guidelines on the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action including the MDAs of the IASC.

The MDAs of the IASC are:

1. promote meaningful participation
2. identify and remove barriers
3. empowerment and capacity strengthening
4. collect and disaggregate data

Light for the World applies a twin-track approach (mainstreaming disability inclusion as well as targeted interventions). We strengthen the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities and OPDs in humanitarian response and collaborate with humanitarian actors on all levels. In all our work, we apply an intersectional approach, ensuring that girls and women with disabilities who face multiple forms of discrimination are not left behind during emergencies.

Inclusive humanitarian action means that persons with disabilities are included in the design, planning and implementation of all humanitarian programmes.

19 UNDESA (2024): Disability and Development Report 2024. Page 331. Available: social.desa.un.org/sites/default/files/2025-09/DDR2024-Full-Report-Final.pdf [accessed 02 February 2026]

Two examples of our work

A new tool for disability data in crises

To close the data gap, Light for the World and the Forum das Associações Moçambicanas de Pessoas com Deficiência (FAMOD), the national umbrella organisation of persons with disabilities in Mozambique, have co-created a new tool to identify persons with disabilities and older persons and the barriers and enablers they face in accessing humanitarian action. The Survey for Inclusive Rapid Assessment (SIRA) shows how inclusive data practices can drive and support data- and evidence-driven advocacy efforts by OPDs. It combines quantitative and qualitative data and is available online for free due to its open-data and open-source principles. The tool facilitates data collection in a time-efficient and easy way, covering humanitarian programming aspects such as distribution, services, sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) and gender-based violence (GBV). The availability of inclusive data helps to strengthen preparedness, response and accountability and supports evidence-based advocacy efforts by OPDs.

Persons with disabilities were at the centre of the process, from the conception to implementation. SIRA was co-created by Light for the World in partnership with FAMOD and humanitarian actors. The tool addresses the four MDAs (see above).

Meaningful participation of persons with disabilities improves the quality and relevance of humanitarian action

IMPACT-BF, implemented by Light for the World in partnership with the Burkinabe Red Cross and the Burkinabe NGO Association d'Appui et d'Eveil Pugsada (ADEP) as part of International Partnerships Austria, is a pioneering initiative aimed at embedding disability inclusion within humanitarian action in Burkina Faso's Centre-East region. Targeting internally displaced persons (IDPs) and host communities, the project specifically addresses the needs of persons with disabilities and prioritises women and children through an intersectional lens.

The project trains humanitarian actors on disability-inclusive protection, strengthens local advocacy and ensures that persons with disabilities and OPDs are meaningfully involved in every stage. It supports survivors of GBV, creates safe spaces for women and ensures inclusive referral pathways to humanitarian services for women with disabilities.

The project has been recognised as an innovative solution, receiving the Zero Project Award 2026, especially its inclusive Village Savings and Loan Associations which support the livelihoods of persons with disabilities.

Recommendations

All actors of humanitarian action must ensure that persons with disabilities are included in the design, planning and implementation of all humanitarian programmes. The following recommendations are based on the MDAs of the IASC and the experience of Light for the World:

► **Collect and disaggregate data:**

- Actively close the data gap by gathering better and more inclusive data that identifies persons with disabilities and the barriers and enablers they face in accessing humanitarian action.
- This can be done by using the SIRA-tool developed by Light for the World, supporting persons with disabilities to collect and use data for advocacy, and humanitarian actors to have more inclusive data for better humanitarian programming.

► **Promote meaningful participation:**

- Actively and meaningfully include persons with disabilities, especially women with disabilities and OPDs, in decision-making process for example in the design of disaster risk reduction plans and emergency response mechanisms.

► **Identify and remove barriers:**

- Identify all institutional, environmental, communication and attitudinal barriers, as well as harmful gender roles and norms that prevent persons with disabilities, especially women with disabilities, from accessing humanitarian programmes and take appropriate measures to remove barriers and challenge norms. Identify and promote enablers that facilitate the participation of persons with disabilities.
- Address intersectional discrimination by ensuring inclusive responses to GBV to which women with disabilities have access during emergencies.

► **Empower persons with disabilities and support them to develop their capacities:**

- Actively enable persons with disabilities and OPDs to take active roles in all phases of humanitarian action by raising awareness of the rights and capacities of persons with disabilities as well as strengthening these capacities (e.g. through training). Strengthen the leadership capacities of women with disabilities.

Austrian context

In 2023, the Council of Ministers adopted an Austrian humanitarian action strategy for the first time²⁰. It defines objectives, responsibilities and priorities more clearly than before. The adopted strategy references vulnerable groups, explicitly including persons with disabilities, and recognises intersectionality. It also refers to the UNCRPD and thus lays important foundations for further inclusive implementation of Austria's humanitarian aid. At the same time, however, there is still a lack of clear indicators and measurable goals to ensure that humanitarian action reaches persons with disabilities.

The independent Austrian Monitoring Committee monitors compliance with the rights of persons with disabilities by the public administration in the area of federal competence. In 2022, the Committee published a statement on inclusion and accessibility in humanitarian aid, which highlights problems in supporting persons with disabilities.

Further Reading

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20 Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2023): Austrian Strategy on Humanitarian Assistance. Available: EN__Strategie_fuer_die_Humanitaere_Hilfe_der_Republik_OEsterreich__08.05.2024_.pdf [accessed 02 February 2026]





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