

Disability, disasters and empowerment



**Evidence from a disability-inclusive
disaster preparedness programme
in Satkhira, Bangladesh**

Poverty and disability are inextricably linked due to the multitude of barriers people with disabilities face. This holds particular relevance to the **social construction of vulnerability to disasters**: the poorest people in a community are often the most vulnerable to the impacts of environmental hazards which expose existing inequalities; those with strong livelihoods and access to resources are inherently less vulnerable, whilst **the impacts of environmental hazards quickly become disasters for the poorest and most excluded groups.**



This evidence is based on research with participants in a DFID funded Sightsavers and Disabled Rehabilitation and Research Association (DRRA) programme. The research was originally conducted for a postgraduate course at King's College London.

DRRA's mission is to promote equitable rights and inclusion of person with disabilities and the destitute in Bangladesh.

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Research in a **Sightsavers** and **Disabled Rehabilitation and Research Association** programme¹ identified **five areas where people with disabilities experience heightened vulnerability to disasters**:

- 1 Poverty and barriers accessing livelihoods** due to the wider context of poverty and regular hazards; discriminatory attitudes of employers; and economic pressures forcing many families to leave people with disabilities isolated at home whilst they seek an income
- 2 Increased risk factors for women** due to existing gender inequalities and performing daily responsibilities during hazards; reduced social mobility in comparison to men; social taboos around physical contact during evacuations; and high rates of sexual violence at shelters and in villages when displaced men take refuge
- 3 Reduced mobility** due to widespread inaccessibility; hazards dramatically changing the environment; distance to shelters; lack of specific evacuation plans; and negative attitudes around assisting people with disabilities
- 4 Inaccessible shelters, relief distribution** due to a shortage of space; a lack of rails, ramps and accessible toilets; discrimination and abuse at shelters; a lack of specific measures to ensure relief reaches people with disabilities at shelters and during community distribution;
- 5 Inaccessible warning systems** due to a lack of consideration for how people with sensory, multiple or complex disabilities will access information and warnings

However, the research found that participation in the programme has fostered various **forms of empowerment**:

Within self-help groups participants have developed **trust** and **collaboration**; accessed **information** and **knowledge** of disaster preparedness; **changed their behaviour** during disasters; and have developed the **confidence to challenge discrimination**.

Participants have also reached out to access their rights through accessing **training, livelihood** and **welfare support**; **advocating** as a group and **holding leaders to account**; and critically, through engagement they have **increased representation of people with disabilities on the bodies responsible for disaster preparedness at the local level**: the Union Disaster Management Committees and Cyclone Preparedness Programme units. This is contributing to the development of **new social norms** and **attitudes to disability**.

¹ Findings are based on group discussions and semi-structured interviews with members of self-help groups formed in the programme. Supporting evidence is from semi-structured interviews with local leaders; government representatives; NGOs; Disabled People's Organisations; and the implementing partners.

Recommendations

The findings of this research demonstrate **the importance of engaging people with disabilities and the bodies responsible for decision-making at local, national and international levels.** The causes of vulnerability to disasters for people with disabilities – and the wider context of poverty and discrimination – show **further disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction and empowerment initiatives are required.**

Inclusive integrated approaches to the development challenges of poverty-reduction, vulnerability to disasters and impacts associated with climate change should:

- Target and engage people with disabilities – giving particular focus to the inclusion of girls and women with disabilities – agree minimum standards for disability inclusive programmes; provide training to workers; and include disability audits in evaluations
- Strengthen national information systems, data collection and use participatory – and disability inclusive – vulnerability and capacity assessments to collate information on people with disabilities to identify existing risks
- Strengthen the capacity and resources of people with disabilities; representative organisations and actively involve them in all stages of disaster management, climate change adaptation and poverty reduction processes
- Design and implement accessible and inclusive warning systems, information and physical support systems
- Raise awareness of disability issues within communities and identify local champions; target families and community networks
- Advocate for and promote the rights and representation of people with disabilities at all levels of society
- Ensure a co-ordinated, sustainable and disability inclusive approach to the development challenges posed by poverty, environmental hazards and the impacts of climate change



Download the full report at:
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We work with partners in developing countries to eliminate avoidable blindness and promote equal opportunities for people with disabilities.

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