

EDITOR'S COMMENT

As the recent tsunami in Asia illustrated, sudden, unexpected disasters are devastating, leaving a long trail of deaths and disabilities. The mortality count from the tsunami is still on the rise and it will take some time before the full magnitude of the disaster in terms of mortality and morbidity becomes clear.

There is a growing concern about the way in which disaster management and rehabilitation programmes are conceived and implemented in many developing countries. While swift action is mandatory for immediate relief for affected persons, it is equally important to have post-disaster programmes that strengthen coping capacities of communities and contribute to long term developmental needs, leading to a permanent positive change.

While disaster has an impact on all affected people, it has been noted that in the case of persons with disability, reduced mobility can lead to less visibility, less access and low survival chances. Persons with disability also tend to get excluded from relief and rehabilitation programmes due to various reasons such as

- lack of prior data on persons with disability living in disaster-prone areas
- lack of awareness about their special needs at the time of a disaster
- lack of information and training to persons with disability and their families to deal with their needs at the time of the disaster
- inadequate early warning communication systems that are specially designed for people with different disabilities
- lack of appropriate rescue systems designed for persons with disability
- unequal distribution of relief resources (leading to exclusion of persons with disability)
- lack of special services (including psychological support) for persons with disability, particularly for women with disabilities during and after a disaster
- problems of isolation when persons with disability are separated from their care-givers and support groups at the time of disasters
- lack of long-term social, economic and psychological support that is specially designed for persons with disability after a disaster situation

Disasters that lead to disability, and the plight of persons with disability in disaster situations deserve a prominent place in the international humanitarian agenda. To better the survival chances of people with special needs during disasters, and to address their long term needs, some suggested strategies are

- a paradigm shift in disability and disaster related policy making, to endorse the needs and rights of persons with special needs
- creation of a database on persons with disability in disaster-prone areas
- awareness programmes for the community, NGOs, organisations of persons with disability and service providers about the special needs of persons with disability, particularly women, and rescue issues related to persons with disability
- training programmes for persons with disability, families and local NGOs, regarding safety measures, preparedness related to disability, transportation, access to shelters and services
- training programmes for community volunteer groups in disability specific interventions, to assist persons with disability during the time of a disaster
- development and dissemination of information related to early warning systems and available services, in ways that are accessible to persons with disability
- making shelters accessible and secure for persons with disability, particularly for women with disability
- ensuring of proper distribution of resources by prior information, training and planning to include persons with disability
- ensuring availability of medical care services, rehabilitation interventions and assistive devices
- lobbying with governments, donors and humanitarian agencies to ensure that disability is an integral part of their disaster response programmes
- Counselling and support services for persons with disability who are separated from their care-givers
- Development and strengthening of post-disaster community development activities that include persons with disability

It is clear that every disaster situation that the world has to deal with today, calls for synergy between the various players involved in disaster management, community development and disability issues.

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