

EDITOR'S COMMENT

After a series of natural disasters in recent years like earthquakes, floods and the Indian Ocean tsunami, there has been much international attention on people with disabilities in disaster situations. Many publications have highlighted the need to include people with disabilities in all aspects of disaster management. Guidelines on how to address needs of people with disabilities during and after a disaster are now available. Some researchers have reported on the situation of people with disabilities after the December 2004 tsunami.

Studies in India have shown that in a disaster situation like the tsunami, people with disabilities have the same needs, similar access and barriers to access to relief, reconstruction and recovery programmes, as the general population. Most people with disabilities and their families report loss of livelihoods as the greatest difficulty they face after a disaster, and one of their biggest unmet needs several months after a disaster is healthcare, like any others in the general population.

The major recommendations from these studies for inclusion of people with disabilities in disaster management programmes would benefit not only people with disabilities, but also other vulnerable groups like the elderly, pregnant women, and women with small children. This underscores the need to promote inclusion/mainstreaming of people with disabilities and their concerns in all development work following a disaster, and the need to sensitise mainstream development sector (government and NGOs) on the benefits of such inclusion, as it would be more cost-effective.

While it is heartening to note that people with disabilities were included in all aspects of disaster management in the tsunami affected areas studied in India, the studies also brought out some negative consequences for aid recipients in post-disaster situations. With the huge outpouring of aid from all quarters, there was bound to be duplication of services, and many people received the same assistance from multiple sources. Even two years after the tsunami, people tended to hide information on the assistance that they had already received, in the expectation of more benefits. In many cases, people's initiative to work and earn on their own had come down with all the benefits they had received.

World-wide, the disability sector emphasises the need for a 'paradigm shift from charity to development'. However, it appears that charity is preferred to and takes precedence over,

development in some post-disaster management programmes, from the perspectives of both service providers and recipients. Many are familiar with the ancient Jewish saying 'Give a man help till he no longer needs to ask for it'. For players in the development sector, including those working with people with disabilities and those involved in disaster management programmes, the key question is when a person no longer needs to ask for help, and also who is to decide this.

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