

This document forms part of the 4th edition of the UNHCR Emergency Handbook and was generated from the digital Emergency Handbook system.

Persons with disabilities

Key points

- Do not assume that disability is visible. Proactively identify individuals with disabilities.
- Consult persons with disabilities to identify their needs and capacities and understand what obstacles impede the effectiveness of protection and assistance programmes.
- Inclusive disability programming is not just about providing ramps and wheelchairs.
- Make sure the language you use to describe persons with disabilities respects their dignity and humanity. (Speak of 'persons with a disability' rather than 'the disabled' or 'handicapped people').
- Consult persons with disabilities when you decide the content of food and non-food assistance packages, to ensure that distribution arrangements are accessible.

1. Overview

Persons with disabilities are at particular risk in an emergency because they are not always identifiable. Because they face specific difficulties in participating actively in decisions that concern them, their essential or urgent protection and assistance needs are less likely to be met.

'Disabilities' include physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments; injuries; and chronic illnesses. Combined with social, cultural, physical, economic and political discrimination, these impairments may prevent persons with disabilities from participating on equal terms with others in society. Persons with disabilities are not a homogeneous group; they have different capacities and needs, and contribute in different ways to their communities.

2. Protection objectives

- To identify and assess the needs of persons with disabilities, from the start of an emergency and throughout.
- To ensure that protection and assistance programmes are accessible to persons with disabilities on an equal footing with other persons of concern.

- To create conditions in which people with disabilities do not suffer discrimination, and participate as much as possible in decisions that affect them.
- To ensure that all responses take account of and include persons with disabilities, by applying an age, gender and diversity lens and considering their specific needs.
- To ensure that appropriate systems are in place during an emergency to prevent and respond to violence against, exploitation or abuse of persons with disabilities.

3. Underlying principles and standards

UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its *Optional Protocol* (2006). Article 11 of the CRPD refers to the safety and protection of persons with disabilities in conflict and emergency situations.

Handicap International, *Disability Checklist for Emergency Response*, 2010. This document is available in braille and large print.

UNHCR Executive Committee, *Conclusion on refugees with disabilities and other persons with disabilities protected and assisted by UNHCR*, 2010.

Reaffirms UNHCR's responsibility and commitment to upholding the rights of persons with disabilities in accordance with existing Conclusions, international conventions, and relevant United Nations General Assembly resolutions. Outlines recommended actions by UNHCR, its partners, and States.

UNHCR/Handicap International, *Need to Know Guidance: Working with Persons with Disabilities in Forced Displacement*, 2011.

Provides practical guidance on issues that must be considered to ensure that the rights of persons with disabilities of concern to UNHCR are met without discrimination.

UNHCR, *Age, Gender and Diversity (AGD) Policy*, 2011.

Explains the objective, rationale and core commitments of an AGD approach, defines diversity, and indicates how to mainstream AGD.

4. Protection Risks

- People with disabilities may experience difficulty in moving, hearing, seeing, communicating or learning. Their disabilities may include injuries or chronic illnesses.
- People with disabilities face a variety of barriers: physical and environmental; attitudinal; policy; and in communication.
- They are more likely to experience: violence, including sexual and domestic abuse; exploitation by family members; discrimination; and exclusion from access to humanitarian assistance, education, livelihoods, health care, a nationality, and other services. Women, older individuals, children, and LGBTI persons who have a disability are doubly exposed to such risks.

- They are likely to be more at risk in dispersed settings (rural and urban) and in recent displacement sites because communities in these locations are less cohesive and community protection mechanisms may be weaker.
- Adolescents and young persons who have disabilities are frequently excluded from peer group activities and social networks that can help to protect them from violence, including sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).
- Children with disabilities may suffer stigma or discrimination (including harassment) at the hands of their peers or teachers, harming their educational opportunities.
- Persons with mental disabilities tend to be less identifiable than individuals with physical and sensory disabilities; as a result, programmes are less likely to address their needs and registration procedures are more likely to overlook them.

5. Other risks

- Persons with disabilities will be particularly at risk, if UNHCR or its partners fail to protect the security of populations of concern.
- The reputation of UNHCR and its partners will be put at risk if they do not fulfil their responsibility to protect all populations of concern.

6. Key decision points

- At the start of an emergency, consider disability when designing shelter and settlement options, selecting sites, planning and designing infrastructure, and setting access standards. Make sure that arrangements for emergency aid distribution address the access needs of persons with disabilities.
- Take immediate steps to respond to the specific needs of persons with disabilities and ensure that day-to-day care is made available.
- Ensure that persons with disabilities are identified and registered.
- Make services and infrastructure physically accessible to those with limited mobility.
- Establish referral systems to ensure that persons with disabilities reach relevant service providers.
- Put in place systems to prevent and respond to violence, exploitation and abuse.
- Ensure that programmes include persons with disabilities, and that persons with disabilities have information about programmes that concern them.
- Ensure that staff, partners and local and national authorities recognize and know how to respond to the specific needs of persons with disabilities.
- In non-camp settings, take steps to identify potential partners and establish an outreach programme, to ensure that persons with disabilities are identified and receive information they need.

7. Key steps

Support services and care arrangements

- Map service providers and potential partners at camp (if applicable), community, local and national level. Identify their specific expertise (medical, psychological, social support, assisted living, prosthetics, disabled persons organizations, etc.), and assess their capacity to respond immediately.
- In consultation with persons who have disabilities, identify service providers, agree coordination mechanisms and establish referral mechanisms for access to services.
- Prioritize persons with disabilities in reunification efforts. Do not separate persons with disabilities from their family members and support persons, or from their assistive devices, adaptive aids, or medication (for example, during relocation or transport).
- Consult the wider displaced community and identify their capacity to support persons with disabilities who are alone (who have no other family members) or who care for children or other persons with disabilities.
- Identify volunteers among persons of concern and in the host community (community workers) who can be trained to assist injured persons and persons with disabilities, and their families.
- Conduct disability inclusion training and capacity building activities for partners and local service providers.

Identification and assessment procedures

- Assign community workers, UNHCR protection staff or community-based protection staff to (pre-)registration points or places of arrivals, to identify and register persons with disabilities.
- Appoint community workers or partners' staff to screen camps and settlements for persons with physical or mental impairments, injuries or chronic illnesses, who may not have been present at (pre-)registration (often due to their condition). Persons with disabilities who have already been identified may be useful sources of information.
- Include specific questions about disabilities in rapid and participatory assessments, to identify their specific needs and difficulties they face meeting them. Ask persons with disabilities which referral mechanisms and which forms of assistance they find the most appropriate and accessible. Train registration staff, and provide guidance on how to identify and record (ad hoc) persons with disabilities (who have not yet registered in ProGres).
- Enter in ProGres the specific needs of persons with disabilities.

Access to services

- Identify families that include individuals with impaired movement. In consultation with them, locate such families close to facilities and services when assigning plots and shelters.
- In consultation with persons who have disabilities, adapt medical centres, distribution sites, water sources, latrines, schools, shelters and other infrastructure to make them safe, accessible and appropriate for persons with disabilities (no barriers or tripping hazards, ramp access, large doorways, hand rails on stairs, space to turn a wheelchair, non-slippery floors, etc.).

- Ensure food and other distributions are accessible to persons with limited mobility by establishing a distribution monitoring system. Consider separate queues, transport support, smaller parcels, or home delivery, where these might be appropriate solutions.
- Consult persons with disabilities on the design of new infrastructures and when deciding what items should be included in distributions (for example, smaller jerry cans). Consultation in advance can avoid expensive adjustments later on.
- Work with school authorities and communities, including children, to identify children with disabilities and include them in education programmes.

Prevention of abuse and exploitation

- Integrate all persons with disabilities in PSEA programmes (Protection of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse) and action to prevent and respond to SGBV (sexual and gender-based violence).
- Through community workers and other partners, establish systems for monitoring and following up the situation of persons with disabilities who are at heightened risk of abuse or exploitation. Implement appropriate referral mechanisms.
- Inform and train persons with disabilities, their families, their caregivers, and community workers, in how to recognize, avoid, and report instances of violence, exploitation and abuse.

Inclusion and information sharing

- Prepare key messages to displaced populations (on the timing of food distribution, health outreach, etc.). Use a variety of communication tools: radio, information booklets, signs (text, symbols, images), word of mouth, etc.
- Consult and involve persons with disabilities and their caregivers in decision-making and programming, including the design, assessment, monitoring, and evaluation of activities.
- Include persons with disabilities in livelihood activities. Identify opportunities and training for them, corresponding to their experience and abilities.

Awareness-raising and advocacy

- Inform staff and partners of the rights of persons with disabilities. Emphasize that responses need to be designed in consultation with persons with disabilities so that these are inclusive and accessible.
- Provide training for UNHCR and partner staff, to raise awareness of disability issues and how to integrate the needs of persons with disabilities into programming and activities.
- Advocate for the inclusion of persons of concern who have disabilities in national policies and services.

8. Key management considerations

- Put in place sufficient staff and resources to meet the specific needs of persons with disabilities.
- Assess programmes regularly to make sure that the AGD policy is implemented.
- Establish monitoring mechanisms for all key steps.
- Establish national partnerships to ensure government services and other national partners remain fully and continuously engaged, and programmes and support for persons with disabilities can be sustained.

9. Resources and partnerships

Staff

- Protection and community-based protection personnel.

Partners

- Partners include UN, INGOs, national NGOs, including disabled people's organizations (DPOs), and government institutions and ministries that work on disability or assist people with disabilities. They often also are able to provide mental health and psychosocial support services as required.

Resources

- Financial resources will be required to plan and implement relevant services, interventions and programmes.

10. Links

[UNHCR's online community-based protection practitioners community](#)
[Handicap International](#)
[HelpAge International](#)
[Source \(an International online resource centre on disability and inclusion\)](#)
[Women's Refugee Commission](#)

11. Media

[Introduction to Community-Based Protection](#)
[UNHCR Video, The end of a long, silent journey. Two Eritrean refugees in Libya](#)
[UNHCR Video, Iraq: Blind Boy's Love of Music](#)

Need help?

CONTACT As first port of call, the UNHCR Dep. Representative (Protection), UNHCR Asst. Rep. (Protection), and/or Snr Protection Officer in the country; or The UNHCR Regional Asst./Dep Rep (Protection) and/or Snr. Regional Protection Officer at the regional office (if applicable); or The Snr. Regional Legal Advisor in the respective UNHCR regional bureau, covering the respective country region, who in turn will liaise as required with the parent unit at UNHCR DIP.

Annexes

- Disability among refugees and conflict-affected populations
- UNHCR Handicap International, Need to Know Guidance. Working with Persons with Disabilities in Forced Displacement, 2011
- UNHCR, Heightened Risk Assessment Tool, 2010
- UNHCR, Protection in Emergencies Toolbox. Protection Checklists, 2013

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