

# Disabled Children in Disaster Management

Subjects: Social Issues

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The definition of disabilities varies widely, with different individuals and institutions having their own definitions. According to the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF): “There remains, however, the difficult question of how best to refer to individuals who experience some degree of functional limitation or restriction. ICF uses the term ‘disability’ to denote a multidimensional phenomenon resulting from the interaction between people and their physical and social environment. For a variety of reasons, when referring to individuals, some prefer to use the term ‘people with disabilities’ while others prefer ‘disabled people’”.

The definition of disaster means “a sudden calamitous event bringing great damage, loss, or destruction”. In the present work, disasters include both natural disasters (also known as natural hazards) and human-made emergencies. Natural disasters are natural events created by the natural forces of the earth, including earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, floods, wildfires, snowstorms, droughts, sinkholes, and climate change. Human-made emergencies are disastrous events caused by human actions, such as terrorist attacks, pandemic outbreaks, suicides, oil spills, nuclear leakages, and bomb explosions. Disaster management refers to government efforts to manage all kinds of hazards to ensure and protect the welfare of the people with the support of various partners, including voluntary organizations, businesses, and local communities.

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## 1. Including children with disabilities into the field of disaster management

Regarding the relationship between disabilities and disasters, a disaster can cause or aggravate disabilities as well as result in human injuries and deaths. For every child killed in a disaster, about three other children become injured, thus becoming children with disabilities. According to Handicap International, more than 11 percent of children in South Sudan are estimated to have ended up with disabilities after the occurrence of various disasters over time<sup>[1]</sup> (pp. 88–89).

How children with disabilities are affected by disasters varies depending on the individual case, such as human loss, physical injuries, building collapse, mental disorder, unequal treatment, and others. Despite difficulties, these risks may be classified into three vulnerabilities: physical vulnerability, psychological vulnerability, and educational vulnerability <sup>[2][3]</sup>. Physical vulnerability includes not only human loss but also physical injuries, while psychological vulnerability causes invisible psychological impacts on children with disabilities in the short term. Educational vulnerability means that children with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to negative education, which is followed by the occurrence of disasters.

The definition of inclusion means “the act of making a person or thing part of a group or collection”<sup>[4]</sup>. The term indicates that all stakeholders have to take appropriate actions to accommodate people with disabilities. The active involvement of these stakeholders in the issue of people with disabilities has significantly increased in importance over the past century. Disability inclusion involves identifying and then eliminating the challenges facing people with disabilities. The inclusion of children with disabilities in disaster management strategies refers to not only the process but also the outcome<sup>[5]</sup>. Hence, children with disabilities should equally participate in or benefit from various disaster management strategies, similarly to children without disabilities. In other words, children with disabilities are not passively taken care of or protected. Rather, they must be engaged with to actively participate in managing disasters via advocating or expressing themselves. Ultimately, all relevant stakeholders should be allowed to participate in the overall disaster management effort to ensure its success.

The special needs population refers to people who require special attention in terms of emergency support functions in the event of a disaster<sup>[6]</sup> (pp. 235–236). These emergency support functions include various aspects, such as transportation, communication, etc. The special needs population consists of diverse groups, such as children, people with disabilities, the aged, non-native speakers, and children with disabilities. These groups require a more flexible and accurate disaster response compared with the population without special needs.

Many people regard children with disabilities as individuals to be cared for and pitied, as victims, or as objects of charity, and thus respond to the needs of these children by donating money and basic necessities. In the 21st century, the issue of children with disabilities has been associated with that of human rights, mainly because children with and without disabilities are granted equal rights to participate in all activities in society. One of these activities is regional disaster management. Particularly regarding human rights, the United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as an international agreement has supported children's political, economic, civil, social, cultural, and health rights<sup>[7]</sup>.

## **2. Cultural Influence**

The disaster culture is an important element in disaster management because the cultural frame in the region determines the response to the occurrence of a specific disaster. Whereas some cultures view hurricanes and tsunamis as disasters, other cultures regard these events as gifts from the gods. This principle may be applicable to disability inclusion<sup>[8]</sup>. The extent of disability inclusion in disaster management differs across regions in terms of the big picture. Moreover, the ways in which children with disabilities are included in disaster management vary widely with the regional culture.

From the research perspective, the literature focuses on two specific areas under the topic of disability in disasters—namely, people with disabilities in the context of disasters and children with disabilities in disasters. Both lines of literature have addressed multiple factors that directly or indirectly contribute to the extent of disabilities in disasters, including physical conditions, psychological stress, a lack of education, social segregation, right-based issues (e.g., people having difficulty finding their voice), and economic deficiency. In particular, children with disabilities experience exposure to various hazards and risks, a high rate of poverty, traumatic separation from caregivers, and others.

Over the past several years, disability researchers have examined the conceptualization of disabilities. Quite a few disaster researchers have recently explored the social vulnerability approach. According to them, the cause of disabilities has been the interplay between individuals' internal characteristics or capacities and their external social variables<sup>[9]</sup> (3–14). In summary, the research on people with disabilities is complicated, mainly because the conceptualization of disabilities, as well as the way people with disabilities describe their difficulties during a disaster, has been diverse.

The field of disaster management has begun to view people with disabilities as being in a vulnerable situation<sup>[10]</sup> (pp. 35–41). Some are unable to evacuate within the short period of disaster response because they are unable to gain access to transportation. Some people with disabilities require health care that is beyond what is routinely given but which is not yet provided. In many developed nations, how evaluation of children's disabilities is carried out by health professionals also influences their access to health resources. Registries have also been often barriers for many individuals with disabilities due to the unclear range of special needs.

Nonetheless, the issue of children with disabilities has not been seriously included in the scope of disaster management before, partially because policy makers have not provided appropriate guidelines for dealing with children with disabilities during a disaster. Similarly, researchers have not given weight to the topic of children with disabilities because they have not considered it to be helpful in shaping inclusive disaster planning<sup>[11]</sup> (pp. 38–39). Recently, the interest taken in children with disabilities has somewhat increased, but data collection on their roles, capacities, and needs is still often overlooked. Hence, children with disabilities have struggled with not only their physical but also their emotional vulnerability, being confronted with unique barriers during all aspects of disaster management.

For example, children with disabilities face more difficulties in discussing or even negotiating the process of disaster recovery than children without disabilities<sup>[12]</sup> (pp. 403–405). Because many disaster services are oriented toward the needs of children without disabilities, children with disabilities have not been able to adequately acquire material resources. In short, they face the challenge of meeting their special needs in an unequal environment<sup>[13]</sup>.

## **3. Social Groups**

Children with disabilities make up a heterogeneous rather than homogenous group<sup>[14]</sup> (pp. 4–5). Their disabilities are the result of the complex relationships between their impairment and their attitudinal, social, cultural, and other environmental challenges. Therefore, every child with disabilities develops his or her own needs, capacities, and responses to the physical environment and thus reacts very differently to the same disaster. In poor areas, girls with disabilities have been socially overlooked more than boys with disabilities.

Individual differences are prevalent, regardless of age. Despite this, there are still some differences between adults with disabilities and children with disabilities in terms of their social environment. The exact differences vary depending on each nation. In the United States, adults with disabilities are protected by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of

1990, whereas children with disabilities are protected by not only the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 but also the Rehabilitation Act of 1973<sup>[15]</sup>. Universally, children with disabilities have to face longer periods to obtain appropriate education than adults with disabilities or the older generation.

Several frameworks on how to include adults with disabilities in disaster management have been proposed and later updated. These frameworks commonly emphasize the necessity of the robust engagement of adults with disabilities at various levels. However, the same pattern has not been applicable to children with disabilities in disaster events<sup>[16]</sup> (pp. 1–3). Therefore, appropriate researches need to study how to include children with disabilities into disaster management more systematically than before.

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