Disability Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction ¹

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Abstract – The Council of Europe’s EUR-OPA Major Hazards Agreement, platform for co-operation in the field of major natural and technological disasters between Europe and the South of the Mediterranean, focuses on the rights of people with disabilities and disaster risk reduction. It aims at setting up inclusive policies and plans taking into account specific needs of people with disabilities in disaster risk management.

Keywords – human rights, people with disabilities, disaster risk reduction, resilience, inclusion

1. The Council of Europe: implementing ethical principles on disaster risk reduction and people’s resilience

The Council of Europe, located in Strasbourg, France was founded in 1949 at the aftermath of the Second World War and is the oldest European institution. It works at intergovernmental level with 47 member States on human rights, the rule of law, the promotion of democracy and common values, thus touching 820 million citizens.

The Council of Europe’s EUR-OPA Major Hazards Agreement acts as a platform for co-operation in the field of major natural and technological disasters between Europe and the South of the Mediterranean. The main objectives of the EUR-OPA Major Hazards Agreement are to reinforce and to promote co-operation between member States in a multi-disciplinary context to ensure better prevention, protection against risks and better preparation in the event of major natural or technological disasters.

On the basis of the Ethical Principles on Disaster Risk Reduction and People’s Resilience, endorsed by the EUR-OPA Committee of Permanent Correspondents in 2011, the Committee decided in 2012 to focus part of its work on guidance for a more operative practice with vulnerable groups. In the context of the triennial programme of activities 2013-2015, the work is centred on vulnerable groups: persons with disabilities, children, migrants, asylum seekers and refugees.

The first topic tackled is people with disabilities and disaster risk reduction, a topic which has so far not been fully addressed. Little has been done to include people with disabilities into practical programmes of action in civil protection.

The human rights approach of the Council of Europe strives to promote the perception of persons with disabilities as holders of rights in the same way as all other citizens, considering disability to be part of human diversity. Defending values and promoting human rights through including people with disabilities in disaster preparedness and response is at the heart of the Council of Europe’s mission. The moral and ethical case for an inclusive approach guarantees the right of people with disabilities to adequate care in disasters.

This topic is important and it is dealt with at prominent places and in key documents:

- In 2013 the theme of the UNISDR 2013 International Day for Disaster Reduction was “living with disabilities and disasters”.
- At the UN General Assembly (September 2013) a consensus was reached on inclusion of people with disabilities in the Post 2015 “Hyogo Framework of Action” work and in the development agenda after 2015.

2. Including people with disabilities in disaster preparedness and response

Taking into account the key documents, the Council of Europe circulated a questionnaire on disability inclusive disaster risk reduction in March 2013 in order to collect examples of good practice and already existing regulations and laws in the field. A report was drawn up taking into account the replies to the questionnaire, portraying the situation related to people with disabilities in disaster pre-

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paredness and response, focusing on different practices, return of experiences, good examples, mentioning the legal issues and drawing attention to what can be done in the case of a disaster. It is accompanied by resulting guidelines and a recommendation on including people with disabilities in disaster preparedness and response.

A workshop presented the findings in Paris on 22-23 October 2013. A broad community of stakeholders met, from the field of disability, civil protection, from specialised ministries, agencies, implicated in the topic including people with disabilities in disaster preparedness and response at policy-making and legislative levels (more than one ministry is concerned), from international organisations or national agencies, active at regional or local levels, in the planning, training and provision of information. However, it is most important to ensure that people with disabilities themselves are included as they are without doubt the best advocates of such issues.

The participants exchanged on good practices and came up with suggestions for the implementation of the recommendation, in order to foster on better resilience, adaptation and resistance to disasters for people with disabilities.

The report, guidelines and recommendation were then discussed and adopted at the 64th meeting of the Committee of Permanent Correspondents of the European and Mediterranean Major Hazards Agreement (EUR-OPA), Paris, France, 24 October 2013 (cf. the executive summary of the report on including people with disabilities in disaster preparedness and response as well as other the activities and documents are available on the EUR-OPA website under: http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/majorhazards/).

The objective is to come up with practical tools for the use of civil protection and people with disabilities and to sensitize stakeholders, increase public awareness and the political profile, thus promoting politics and strategies which address the needs of people with disabilities.

The workshop on people with disabilities and disaster risk reduction (DRR) was clearly a success. This issue has not been dealt with by other international organisations, neither those involved in the rights of people with disabilities (which are largely unaware of DRR and risks incurred by people with disabilities), nor the DRR community which has worked very little with people with disabilities. Thus the issues addressed and the high profile given by the Council of Europe to aspects of human rights and vulnerable people in civil protection were indeed received as a very innovative and worthwhile exercise. Civil protection services have understood that they need to deal with the 15
disabilities.

People with disabilities constitute a very large minority that consists of between one sixth and one fifth of the general population of most countries. When major incidents and disasters occur, people with disabilities face hardship that is potentially greater than that of the majority population, and they can suffer additional forms of discrimination or neglect. The moral and ethical case for an inclusive approach that guarantees the right of people with disabilities to adequate care in disasters is unsailable. Thus, warning, evacuation, shelter, transitional housing and other emergency provisions are services that need to be fully accessible and usable by a wide range of people with disabilities. Whereas measures for the general population are generally created for groups, a certain number of persons with disabilities require individual assistance, which may involve a fundamental reorientation in the way that civil protection services are planned and delivered.

It is vitally important to understand the needs of people with disabilities during the exceptional circumstances created by major incidents and disasters. It is also essential not to subsume these needs among those pertaining to minorities and disadvantaged groups in general. Emergency measures should seek to preserve the dignity and (where possible) the autonomy of people with disabilities. Academic and practical studies of disability and disaster reveal that there is a significant shortfall between the recognition of these principles and their implementation in practical programmes of action. The shortfall includes failure to design programmes and plans, implement them and monitor their effectiveness.

Planning is an essential part of preparing for emergencies. In order to ensure that resources, manpower and organisation are in place, plans and preparations need to be made at the national level, which should also be the level at which plans and measures are promoted and harmonised at the intermediate and local levels of public administration. Healthcare institutions, social services, and voluntary organisations in the fields of disability and civil protection need to work together at all levels at both the planning and response modes to create viable programmes of emergency care for people with disabilities. Coordination by a single, responsible government entity should nevertheless involve all the organisations involved in responding to emergencies on behalf of people with disabilities. It is important to note that all plans to assist people with disabilities are local in their implementation and outcome, and hence attention needs to be devoted to this level. Plans must be consolidated by frequent updating and testing, which should be complemented by programmes of training designed to ensure that all emergency responders are fully familiar with their roles, responsibilities and the procedures they will need to employ in a crisis or disaster.
In Europe and the Mediterranean area, countries are striving to improve their emergency preparedness. However, little has been done to include people with disabilities into practical programmes of action in civil protection. However, some examples of good practice do exist. These include the creation of specific offices to run programmes for protecting people with disabilities in disaster, ensuring that the problem is adequately dealt with in national disaster response legislation, finding innovative and alternative ways of disseminating warnings to people with cognitive problems, hearing impairments, or who do not understand the local language (for example, tourists, visitors and workers from other countries).

Examples of good practice from around the world highlight the importance of translating it to new situations and ensuring that lessons are learned by implementing them into improved outcomes. For example, evacuation needs require attention to accessibility issues and forms of alerting that take account of people’s disabilities. It also requires accessible transportation and shelter. Occupant emergency plans (OEPs) should be written for key buildings, and such instruments should take account of the needs of people with disabilities.

In conclusion, people with disabilities, and the organisations that represent them, need to be drawn into the civil protection preparedness process. Policies and plans need to be inclusive, but the particular needs of people with disabilities should not be subsumed in a “compromising manner” into wider amalgamations of disadvantaged groups.

Preparing for disaster with and on behalf of people with disabilities requires political commitment, national and local co-ordination, strategic planning, networking, knowledge management, optimisation of resources and the development of good communication strategies.

References


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