

Working with older people

Older people are highly vulnerable to disasters, but their breadth of experience can be invaluable in response and recovery efforts.

However, there is evidence that the needs of older people are routinely neglected in humanitarian protection, programming and funding. The risks they face, particularly those with pre-existing or newly acquired functional or communication difficulties are often exacerbated by emergencies.

Vulnerability and risks to older people

Worsening of pre-existing exclusion, marginalisation, isolation and poverty

- being separated, or lack of support from family or community
- unable to leave or return home so isolated and neglected
- death or separation of family members can leave older people to care for children

Being victim of abuse or neglect

- abuse, rape, robbery and confinement of older people go unchallenged

Invisibility to humanitarian actors

- discrimination and lack of consultation and participation
- seen as 'poor investment' for programmes because they are perceived as unable or unwilling to learn, or high risk as may die

Lack of age-friendly assistance

- specific health and nutrition needs, mobility and psychosocial needs often not understood or prioritised in humanitarian responses
- those physically less able find it difficult to secure food, water, fuel and access to services or possibility to escape from unsafe situations

Loss of property rights and personal documentation

- no documentation; poor family tracing services; land tenure systems break down

Taking the needs of older people into account

Incorporate the Humanitarian Inclusion Standards for older people and people with disabilities* in design, planning and implementation of all humanitarian action.

Disaggregate data - collect, analyse and use sex, age and disability disaggregated data as the basis for response planning.

Identify and locate older people - through records, checks, outreach, communities.

Consult - include older people in needs and capacities assessments; decision-making bodies; special interest groups; ensure two-way communication.

Meet basic needs - facilitate access to shelter, fuel, culturally acceptable and appropriate clothing, food, cooking utensils; extra blankets or clothes for warmth; appropriate health services, water, latrines, livelihood support.

Enable mobility - develop outreach and incorporate home visiting into assessment, programmes and monitoring; provide easily accessible service delivery points; 'fast track' queues for most frail and vulnerable; consider issues using trucks for transport.

Address social, psychosocial and family needs - extend family tracing services; provide psychological support; strengthen family and community structures; raise awareness of risks of abuse, robbery, intimidation.

Recognise and support the participation of older people - as an important source of local knowledge, community and family care, involvement and support.

Protect people's rights - protect housing, land and property rights.



Older people have a wide range of skills, capacities and roles which can support recovery:

- Income generation and financial support to their family
- Child care for dependants and sick family members
- Housekeeping and guarding
- Disaster coping strategies
- Recovery and reconstruction
- Traditional healing and crafts
- Motivation of others and personal courage in adversity
- Taking a beneficiary leadership role
- Preservation and transmission of culture, stories, activities
- Family and community conflict resolution
- Community knowledge can assist targeting and distribution of relief
- Historical knowledge can assist in assessing damage and impact of disasters.

Adapted from 'Older people in emergencies', HelpAge, 2012

Additional resources on All In Diary website

Humanitarian inclusion standards for older people and people with disabilities, © CBM International, HelpAge International and Handicap International 2018*
Older voices in humanitarian crises: calling for change © HAI 2016
Nutrition for older people in emergencies © HAI 2013

Web links for further information

Technical guidance:
<http://www.helpage.org/what-we-do/emergencies/older-people-in-emergencies/>