



Expert Group Meeting on Older Persons in Emergency Crises

United Nations Headquarters, Room S-1520
15-17 May 2019, New York

CONCEPT NOTE

Background

The occurrence and duration of emergency crises have increased in the past years. Between 2005 and 2017 the number of crises receiving an international response grew from 16 to 30, and their average duration rose from 4 to 7 years.¹ Emergency crises comprise human-made disasters like conflicts, and natural disasters such as hurricanes, storms or droughts. Natural and human-made disasters are often intertwined. For example, in 2017 water was determined to play a major role in conflict in at least 45 countries.² Evidence suggests that as climate change intensifies, the number of emergency crises will increase.

Exclusion faced by persons due to individual and social characteristics, such as age, sex, marital status, socio-economic factors, and health status, can determine their capacity to respond to crises, as well as their access to mitigation, adaptation and relief resources. Older persons are particularly at risk in disasters.³ Health conditions, such as impaired physical mobility, diminished sensory awareness or chronic illness, as well as social and economic disadvantages, can hinder the ability of many older persons to prepare and adapt to disasters.⁴ Older women can be more at risk than their male counterparts because on average they outlive men and are more often widowed and alone. Those that are less educated, unskilled, and poor are more likely to be victims of physical, financial, familial and sexual abuse which can be exacerbated in emergency situations.

In emergency settings, where access to resources and services may be uneven, the overlook of the specific needs and challenges faced by older persons can have dire consequences for their well-being.⁵ Ageist attitudes can exacerbate exclusion and reinforce the loss of control over community resources and assets often experienced by older persons in emergency crises.⁶ Older persons are also harmed by ageist assumptions that they will be taken care of by family members.⁷

Even though age-disaggregated data in emergency situations is limited, available data show that older persons are more at risk in crises than other groups. For instance, around 75 per cent of

¹ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2018) *World Humanitarian Data and Trends 2018*

² Ibid

³ E/CN.5/2019/7

⁴ Center for Disease Control and Prevention *CDC's Disaster Planning Goal: Protect Vulnerable Older Adults*

⁵ Ibid

⁶ E/CN.5/2019/7

⁷ Ibid

persons who perished as a result of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 were older than 60 years.⁸ In the 2012 crisis in South Sudan, the mortality rate among people aged 50 years or older was reported to be over four times the mortality rate for persons between 5 and 49 years of age.⁹

It is important to note that, while older persons are typically more at risk, they are not a homogeneous group and they are affected by emergency crises in different ways depending on their social inclusion and their specific health, social and economic situation. In fact, they can be of great help in times of disaster by sharing their know-how and experience. Their knowledge and skills can be invaluable in understanding and predicting local environmental events and their impacts.

The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing identifies the specific actions needed to ensure equal access of older persons to services during and after humanitarian emergencies. Furthermore, it calls upon member states to enhance the positive contributions of older persons in reconstruction and rebuilding efforts.¹⁰

In spite of such recognition, evidence shows that older persons are often overlooked in emergency relief systems, which aggravates their vulnerabilities and worsens their capacity to respond and adapt to disasters. Indeed, consideration of the differential needs and challenges faced by older persons is often lacking in all phases of emergency relief and management, from preparedness to response and recovery or post-disaster reconstruction.¹¹ This may result in older persons being overlooked in the planning and design of emergency actions, or in the lack of the necessary skills among aid workers to understand, identify and address the specific needs of older persons, including nutrition, medical and psychosocial care.^{12 13}

As a group with differential needs, older persons may require tailored assistance or specific approaches to respond to their needs. Yet, research shows that between 2010 and 2014, less than 1 per cent of implemented humanitarian projects included at least one activity targeted at older persons.¹⁴ Actions that are blind to the needs and specific circumstances of older persons may worsen the outcomes for them, their families and the community at large.

These findings point to the importance of fully integrating older persons in all policies related to emergency management. This involves the development of research, as well as the disaggregation of quality data by age prior and during disasters, to enable policy makers to fully understand and respond to the needs of older persons and to maximize their contribution.

In context of rapid population ageing, a predicted increase in the number of disasters will result in large numbers of older persons impacted by emergency crises. This reality attests to the urgency of ensuring that policies and programmes are sensitive to the specific risks, challenges and strengths of older persons and encourage and support their contributions in all phases of

⁸ Al-rousan, Tala M. and others (2014) *Preparedness for Natural Disasters Among Older US Adults: A Nationwide Survey*. American Journal of Public Health, vol. 104, No. 3 (March)

⁹ Atlani-Duault, Laëtitia, and others (2018) *The elderly: an invisible population in humanitarian aid*. The Lancet, Vol. 3, (January)

¹⁰ A/CONF.197/9

¹¹ Ferris, Elizabeth, and Petz, Daniel (2012) *The year that shook the rich: a review of natural disasters in 2011* The Brookings Institution – London School of Economics Project on Internal Displacement

¹² Ibid

¹³ HelpAge International (2016) *Older voices in humanitarian crises: Calling for change*

¹⁴ Massey, Emma, and others (2017) Health needs of older populations affected by humanitarian crises in low- and middle-income countries: a systematic review. Conflict and Health 11:29

risk assessment, disaster preparedness, crisis management and recovery programmes in order to fully respect their human rights and guarantee that no one is left behind.

Purpose

The meeting will bring together international experts and relevant stakeholders to explore and propose some key recommendations on the issue of older persons in emergency crises both as a group that faces specific risks and as a group to be tapped for their experience in national and international emergency relief systems.

The conclusions and recommendations of this expert group meeting will serve to position UNDESA to better support Member States in the context of two important policy processes: (a) the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; and (b) the General Assembly's Open-ended Working Group on Ageing.

The legislative mandate for this meeting was established by the General Assembly through Resolution A/RES/73/143.

Methodology

The meeting will be conducted as a series of presentations that will be followed by in- depth discussions. Participants will be invited to contribute to the formulation of recommendations related to the issues identified in the meeting.

Outcome

A report summarizing the experts' deliberations and presenting the meeting's recommendations will be issued. The report will serve as input to discussions at the eleventh session of the Open-ended Working Group on Ageing as well as to future reports of the Secretary-General.

Organization of the meeting

Date and venue

The programme on ageing of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), as the focal point on ageing in the United Nations system, will organize an expert group meeting on "Older Persons in Emergency Crises" from 15 to 17 May 2019. The meeting will be held at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, Conference Room S-1520 on the 15th floor of the Secretariat Building.

Participants

The meeting will bring together around 15 experts from national Governments, civil society, academia and the UN system.

Language

The working language of the expert group meeting will be English.