



## Expert Group Meeting

# *The protection of persons with disabilities in situations of risk and the uptake of easy-to-understand communication*

2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> May 2023

### Report

#### Introduction

The Member States of the United Nations requested the Secretary-General to submit a report on the rights of persons with disabilities in situations of risk<sup>1</sup> to the General Assembly at its seventy-eighth session (resolution A/RES/76/154). In addition, Member States requested the Secretary-General (resolution A/RES/77/240) to address the promotion of easy-to-understand communication as an accessibility resource and tool for persons with disabilities.

To inform this report, the Programme on Disability Section of the Division for Inclusive Social Development (DISD) of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) organized an expert group meeting (EGM). The meeting took place virtually between 2-4 May with the participation of self-advocates and experts (20) from the United Nations, civil society and academia.

The current report summarizes the key takeaways from this meeting. The next section provides an overview of the topics covered while Section II provides a set of key recommendations that will inform the development of the Secretary-General Report.

### 1. Summary of discussions

#### 1.1. Article 11

The Sendai Framework recognizes the disproportionate impact of disasters on persons with disabilities. It also highlights the importance of their knowledge and leadership in building

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<sup>1</sup> Article 11 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states that "States Parties shall take, in accordance with their obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law and international human rights law, all necessary measures to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk, including situations of armed conflict, humanitarian emergencies and the occurrence of natural disasters".



resilient and inclusive societies. This recognition was mainly due to the active participation of persons with disabilities in the negotiations, unlike the process that led to the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

The mid-term review of the Sendai framework also shows that national frameworks are increasingly inclusive. However, the results of the follow-up 2023 United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction survey of persons with disabilities and support persons<sup>2</sup> indicates limited progress in disability inclusion, especially in the area of individual preparedness. It highlights the role of an early warning system and the importance, even if still lacking, of dedicated leadership roles with knowledge of disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction. In the survey, persons with disabilities also indicated the importance of 1) addressing underlying risk factors; 2) providing universal design and accessible infrastructure; 3) improving preparedness and resilience, and 4) collaborating across stakeholders are key actions to be taken in the next 7 years.

These priorities resonate with the evidence that disaster mortality closely correlates with income and the quality of risk governance: since 2000, almost 90% of 1.2 million deaths recorded in major reported disasters occurred in low and middle-income countries, where about 80 per cent of the population with disabilities live. Further, people with disabilities are more likely to experience poverty and social and logistical isolation, which weakens their ability to adapt to climate change.

However, global and domestic climate adaptation policies<sup>3</sup> still exclude persons with disabilities. While this might be a symptom of a lack of capacity for disability inclusion in the field of climate change, the experience and expertise of persons with disabilities could help fill this gap in contexts where political momentum is present. Engagement may also lead to an increase in the inclusion of persons with disabilities in international aid geared to address climate change, which currently is not systematic.

Humanitarian action instead is the area where greater progress was made in the promotion of protection and inclusion of persons with disabilities. This includes the adoption of the Charter on the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities and the development of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee guidelines along with the establishment of the Disability Reference Group. The adoption of the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy has also brought greater inclusion of persons with disabilities.

There has also been progress in recent years in how data on persons with disabilities is being collected and used in humanitarian contexts even if challenges remain regarding data quality, the engagement of persons with disabilities in data collection and further disaggregation by age and

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<sup>2</sup> It covers 6,300 persons with disabilities and support persons. A quarter experienced displacement mainly due to armed conflict or widespread violence: 57.1% of the respondents are now internally displaced, 20.8% are refugees, 10% are returnees and 9.8% are seeking asylum, and 2.3% are international migrants.

<sup>3</sup> Only 26 state parties to the Paris Agreement mentioned disability vaguely mentioned in nationally determined contributions or 13% of the total. Only 46 parties (a quarter of the total) mentioned disability in national adaptation policies. Just 15 policies had an actual measure on the climate resilience of persons with disabilities.



gender, among others. As such, challenges remain in the operationalization of a people-centered approach that brings together disability with different thematic areas, such as gender and diversity.

More systematic coordination in humanitarian action is also needed to engage and include persons with disabilities in country-level operations. At the moment ad-hoc solutions such as the age and disability working groups have been launched. These initiatives are not part of official coordination mechanisms and are often sectoral rather than aiming to mainstream disability across clusters.

Similarly, persons with disabilities are usually excluded from (in)formal peacebuilding efforts, which represent an invaluable opportunity to advance the disability inclusion agenda and rebuild more inclusive societies. In this regard, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities were mentioned in 118 out of 1789, or 6.6 per cent, of peace agreements from 1990 to 2019<sup>4</sup>.

Some groups also tend to be better represented, for example, persons with reduced mobility and persons who acquired their disability during the conflict. The overrepresentation of these groups in peacebuilding may reflect a generalized lack of awareness of persons with disabilities and their rights in the peace and security sector.

The realization of article 11 will also require that refugees with disabilities, stateless persons, and asylum seekers are to be engaged and represented in the disability movement. However, persons with disabilities who are forced to flee do not often enjoy the rights enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. For example, access to asylum procedures may be limited by issues of accessibility even if there are standards in place concerning, for example, persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities. Access to social services, including social protection, may also be denied, especially access to benefits that stem from national certification for disability.

Likewise, lack of accessibility and safety hampers access to mechanisms in place for persons with disabilities to provide feedback and make complaints to humanitarian actors, namely accountability to affected people. These gaps often stem from the limited opportunities for engagement and leadership of persons with disabilities in humanitarian contexts and more broadly in situations of risk.

## 1.2. Easy-to-understand communication

Engaging persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in making information and communication easy to understand is a critical component in the promotion and mainstreaming of this approach. Information and communication that are easy to understand allow citizens with or without disabilities to make informed decisions and fully participate in

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<sup>4</sup> Molloy, Sean (2019). Peace Agreements and Disabled Persons (PA-X Research Report). Edinburgh: Global Justice Academy, University of Edinburgh



public and political life. Importantly, using easy-to-understand communication helps remove barriers, build awareness and include people with intellectual and/or learning disabilities, among others.

So far, there has been a greater focus on making written information accessible and easy to understand through the use of plain language and/or Easy Read formats. Plain language makes information accessible to a wide audience including some persons with disabilities, but not all. Contrarily, Easy Read formats combine images and text and make written information accessible for persons with intellectual and/or learning disabilities, among others, while being easy to understand for everyone.

For example, some countries made some legislations, mainly on disability rights, accessible through Easy Read and national governments offer accessible information and guidelines in their official languages. However, international actors tend to produce documents and guidance in Easy Read mainly relying on English. The lack of policies and guidance on the accessibility of information (in different languages) and, more specifically, on easy-to-understand communication represents a key barrier in this regard.

Policies and guidelines would help Member States and organizations define capacity needs, priorities, quality control mechanisms, standards and templates and the use of language that is inclusive and culturally appropriate. The promotion of easy-to-understand communication, particularly in written formats, also hinges on making documents easy to find for persons with disabilities (i.e. online platforms). Establishing feedback mechanisms to evaluate the use of these documents and whether persons with disabilities access them may also help prioritize and allocate resources more effectively.

Experience from civil society and the United Nations suggests that embedding easy-to-understand communication in organizational practices requires a whole-entity commitment to the inclusion of persons with disabilities. At the same time, the continuous engagement of persons with disabilities helps organizations make easy-to-understand communication a common organizational practice and a tool to empower persons with disabilities.