



An inclusive response to older persons in humanitarian emergencies

The occurrence and duration of emergencies, whether human-made or natural disasters, have increased in the past years. Between 2008 and 2018 the number of crises receiving an international response grew from 12 to 22, and their average duration rose from 6 to 9 yearsⁱ.

The capacity of individuals to respond to emergencies and effectively access mitigation, adaptation and relief resources is determined by their individual and social characteristics, including age, sex, marital status, socioeconomic factors and health status, among others.

Older persons are particularly at risk in disasters. Health conditions, such as impaired physical mobility, diminished sensory awareness or chronic illness, as well as social and economic disadvantages, often hinder their ability to prepare and adapt to disastersⁱⁱ. 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.

Yet, evidence shows that older persons and their differential needs and challenges are often overlooked in emergency relief systems, which aggravates their vulnerabilities and worsens their capacity to respond and adapt to disasters or conflicts. Further, where relief systems fail to consider and account for older persons, aid workers may lack the necessary skills to understand, identify and address their specific needsⁱⁱⁱ.

In a context of rapid population ageing, a predicted increase in the number of disasters will result in large numbers of older persons impacted by humanitarian emergencies. 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 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.

An inclusive response should^{iv}:

KEY MESSAGES

- Population ageing, coupled with a predicted increase in the number of humanitarian emergencies, will result in large numbers of older persons impacted by emergencies in the future
- Older persons are often overlooked in emergency relief systems, which worsens their capacity to respond and adapt in crises
- Promoting the rights of older persons in emergencies, supporting their effective engagement in the design and implementation of humanitarian actions and confronting ageism are essential for an inclusive humanitarian response
- An age-inclusive emergency response requires adequate financing and a solid knowledge base

1 Promote the rights of older persons in emergencies and ensure that humanitarian action is inclusive of their needs, challenges and contributions

- Marginalization, exclusion and poverty experienced by many older persons is exacerbated during emergencies
- The needs, challenges and contributions of older persons are often overlooked in emergencies due to physical, attitudinal, environmental and institutional barriers
- Establishing human rights and confronting ageism in humanitarian action is a pre-condition for an age-inclusive humanitarian response
- Humanitarian assistance should be impartial and accountable and respond to the specific vulnerabilities of older persons
- Leadership and coordination among Governments, United Nations and other relevant entities is crucial to move the agenda of older persons in emergencies forward
- Older Persons should be incorporated in institutional mandates of humanitarian entities



2 Promote an age-inclusive response to emergencies

- Older persons and their associations should be involved in the design and implementation of policies, plans, standards and programmes in emergency settings
- Include age-related considerations in needs assessment, planning, monitoring and reporting of humanitarian action
- Where appropriate, review targeting criteria to ensure older persons are included
- Acknowledge and address the needs, challenges and contributions of older women in emergencies
- Build a culture of preparedness among all stakeholders
- Address gender-based violence experienced by older women in emergencies
- Ensure that older persons in displacement have access to adequate social protection in host countries
- Health services should take into consideration the differential health needs of older persons, providing treatment for NCD, mental health and isolation
- Likewise, nutrition assessments should be mindful of the nutritional needs of older persons
- Support older persons to access registration services and obtain identity documents
- Remove age caps, and other discriminatory criteria, in the access to livelihood programs
- Accessibility and universal design should be applied in all aspects and phases of humanitarian action, including in shelter and transitional housing
- Promote access of older persons to justice, remedy and legal support in emergencies
- Older person's access to water, sanitation and hygiene in emergencies needs to be ensured
- Older persons in displacement face specific situations that should be examined in the context of durable solutions
- Ensure that new technologies in humanitarian contexts include, rather than further exclude, older persons
- Older persons, in particular older women, play a key role as caregivers in emergencies. Therefore a humanitarian action that is blind to their situation also affects their families and community at large

3 Provide adequate financing for an age-inclusive response

- Funding should be provided to appropriately support the specific needs and rights of older persons in emergency settings
- Donors could establish requirements related to the inclusion of older persons in their funding and adopt guidelines for inclusive grant making
- Bring visibility to the neglect of older persons in emergencies by examining the actual expenditure on targeted support for older persons in emergencies
- Support and fund local humanitarian actors

4 Build and strengthen the knowledge base

- Collect, compile and disseminate data disaggregated by age, sex and disability
- Conduct age-specific research on issues relevant to older persons in emergencies
- Collect age and gender disaggregated data regarding access to entitlements under national systems during emergencies
- Develop and maintain the knowledge and skills of humanitarian actors through continuous learning to enable them to identify the needs of people at risk in emergencies, including older people, and deliver appropriate and accessible assistance
- Support national and local capacity through training



[i] Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, [Global Humanitarian Overview 2019](#) (2019)
 [ii] United Nations *Follow-up to the International Year of Older Persons: Second World Assembly on Ageing A/74/170 Report of the Secretary-General* (2019)
 [iii] Idem
 [iv] These recommendations were identified by experts in the [Expert Group Meeting on Older Persons in Emergency Crises, held in the United Nations Headquarters on 15-17 May 2019](#)