

**Committee/Council:** Special Conference on Persons with Disabilities

**Issue:** Reducing the risks for persons with disabilities in emergency situations

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## Introduction

We are guilty of living in a world so able-body oriented that we tend to disregard the thought that disabled individuals are marginalized and left to fend for themselves in a vastly industrialized world. The situation only worsens when we move to LEDs and observe the living conditions of disabled individuals. The strain of imperialism, exploitation and other remnants of world history have left entire countries unable to tend to the needs of persons with disabilities. Therefore, it needs to be deeply ingrained in all our minds that we are living and profiting off a unique privilege that many others do not enjoy. Long before we can discuss the issue at hand we need to collectively realize that we are only bystanders discussing an issue most of us do not have much personal insight on, and thus we should treat this matter with respect and an open mind.

Nowadays the needs of persons with disabilities in emergency situations are still being overlooked by the general public and the governments. After incidences like the 2010 Haiti earthquake because of which about 200,000 people have been left with permanent disabilities, establishing inclusive preparation and strategy building for emergency situations, as well projecting the lives and needs of disabled people to the public has been proven as a mandatory prerequisite in order to safeguard the rights of disabled people to safety and treatment in situations of emergency and conflict.

It is necessary to acknowledge that improved infrastructure and support services will provide more benefits not only to this specific part of the population, but also to the society as a whole. Therefore, making this effort shouldn't be considered by the government or the general public as unimportant or optional but as a mandatory step for national and international growth and development.

In this conference you are called to cooperate and work, in order to come up with pioneering and effective measures outlining the course of action needed to ensure the safety of persons with disabilities in such situations.

## Definition of Key-Terms

### Disability

Disability is a term that covers any physical or mental condition of a person, which prevents them from participating in certain activities or life situations. Therefore the context of this term depends on the relation between a person's characteristics and their society's characteristics.

### Emergency

According to the WHO (World Health Organization): "Emergency is a term describing a state. It is a managerial term, demanding decision and follow-up in terms of extraordinary measures (Oxford Pocket Dictionary, 1992). A "state of emergency" demands to "be declared" or imposed by somebody in authority, who, at a certain moment, will also lift it. Thus, it is usually defined in time and space, it requires threshold values to be recognized, and it implies rules of engagement and an exit strategy. Conceptually, it relates best to Response."

### Emergency preparedness

Emergency preparedness defines the actions that are taken beforehand in order to ensure that a possible emergency situation is handled suitably and successfully.

### Emergency threshold

According to the ODI/HPN paper 52, 2005, Checchi and Roberts: "Emergency threshold is the mortality rate above which an emergency is said to be occurring. Usually taken as a crude mortality rate of 1 per 10 000 per day, or as an under-five mortality rate of 2 per 10 000 per day."

### Handicap

It is also important to recognize the difference between a disability and a handicap. Handicap is a disadvantage, which prevents a person from fulfilling a role that is considered normal and is relative to their surroundings. Therefore, a handicap can be limited if the appropriate measures are taken in order to facilitate the activities the individual is expected to conduct when fulfilling a certain role.

## Background Information

Although people with disabilities have been marginalized for many years, the consequences of emergency situations throughout the years have directed the attention of governments to the rights of such people to safety and treatment in emergency situations.

During emergency situations disabled people and people with special needs are more exposed to the danger due to them falling through the cracks of the system. Firstly, infrastructure, evacuation plans and transportations systems are often not inclusive for people who have different and more needs than the rest of the population in such situations. Secondly, the rest of the population is often prioritized in treatment, shelter and evacuation procedures since they are often thought to demand more complex treatment, while they also need properly constructed escape routes and services which are most of the times inexistent. Therefore, disabled people are more likely to be denied help from shelters and other organizations and to be left behind during emergency evacuations due to inadequate preparation.

In a state of emergency people with special needs are differently affected by the environment that they are in. For example, when in unfamiliar surroundings people who are visually impaired may require assistance from another person during an emergency evacuation, since guide dogs may get disoriented at such times. Also, a visually impaired person may show reluctance when asked to abandon a familiar environment and in such cases guidance should be provided with the required expertise and professionalism. Furthermore, people with hearing disabilities may require specialized mechanisms in order to be notified in cases of emergency, while people with mobility or intellectual disabilities may need help in getting to safety. Assistance should also be provided to people that do not speak the native language of the country in which they reside during their preparation for emergencies through special groups or other programs, while dementia sufferers should be catalogued. In conclusion, governmental and non-governmental organizations should be able to provide special help to people with disabilities at any time during a critical situation.

In cases where the evacuation and treatment of disabled people is not properly facilitated, not only are such people negatively affected but so is society as a whole. Ignoring the rights of people with special needs in emergency situations endangers their lives, thus jeopardizing the socioeconomic development of their country. Working towards ensuring and protecting the rights to safety and support of people with disabilities is necessary for the achievement of equality and the protection of human rights in today's world.

## Major Countries and Organizations Involved

### Action on Disability and Development

ADD is an organization aiming to support people with disabilities mainly focusing on developing countries where the majority of people with such special needs are observed. Its activities revolve around funding programs, raising awareness on the matter and conducting training in order to educate people willing to help.

### Handicap International

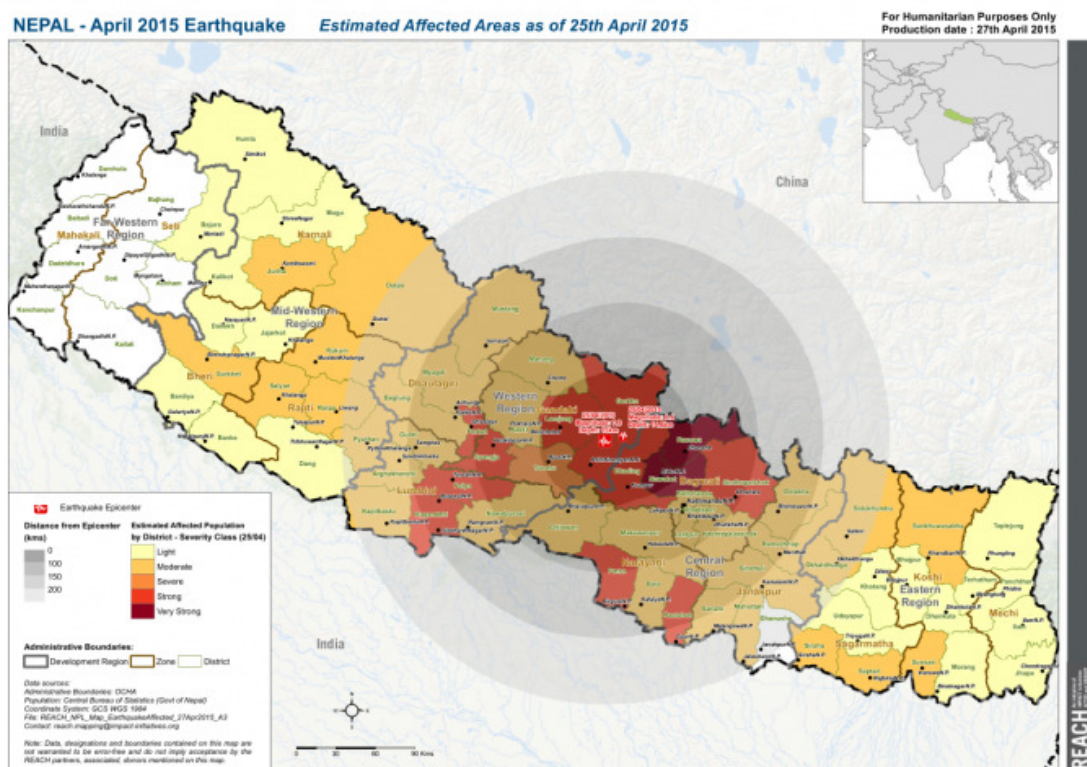
Handicap International aims to facilitate the proper integration and representation of disabled people into society through working to ensure the protection of their rights, providing emergency humanitarian assistance during emergencies and rehabilitation services etc. It is currently active in regions in need of immediate and efficient humanitarian aid such as Syria, Iraq and Nepal.

### India

A large percentage of the world's people with disabilities live in India. However, the inconvenient infrastructure and societal values do not allow them to lead a comfortable life or satisfy many of their basic and societal needs. Therefore, there is a desperate need for the establishment of more rehabilitation centers and adequate infrastructure.

### Nepal

In Nepal it is widely believed that a disability is a means of repayment for past lives' sins. Therefore, most people with disabilities are discriminated against, often live hidden by their families, do not have equal rights with the rest of the population and there haven't been any efforts at making the proper adjustments in the country's infrastructure. Furthermore, the April and May 2015 earthquakes that have cost over 5,000 lives and led to about 1.4 million Nepalese people in need of humanitarian aid has made the need for rehabilitation services, humanitarian assistance, proper infrastructure and re-integration programs more urgent than ever before.



**Figure 1.1: The areas affected by the Nepal earthquake in 25 April 2015.**

## Iraq

In Iraq there are over 3 million people that are physically disabled and are not victims of the war. The laws that apply to these people have repeatedly failed to be implemented in the past, while over 400,000 people who have fled to Kurdistan to seek stability don't have access to medical care and supplies, such as medicine, wheelchairs etc.

## South Sudan

The political crisis that began in South Sudan December 2014 is accountable for 1.5 million internally displaced people along with 480,000 seeking refuge in other countries. Handicap International is trying to access and provide to disabled people through teams responsible for offering rehabilitation services, while also raising awareness on the dangers of ammunition used in conflict. Other organizations are also provided with supplies in order to tend to persons with disabilities too.

## Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
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3 December 1982	World Program of Action Concerning Disabled Persons was created through resolution 37/52, whose goal is the prevention of disabilities, the establishment of rehabilitation and protection of the rights of people with disabilities.
30 March 2007	The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was signed.
12 January 2010	The magnitude- 7 Haiti earthquake affected more than 3 million people in the country leaving over 300,000 people with injuries. The provision of humanitarian aid became more challenging due to the cholera outbreak that occurred in late 2010.
11 March 2011	In northeastern Japan an earthquake with a magnitude of 9.0 on the Richter scale caused a tsunami that affected the coast of Honshu and the meltdown of a Fukushima Daichi power plant. The devastating consequences of the phenomenon, which included over 15,000 deaths and about 5,300 injuries, were the results of its unpredictable intensity, since scientists had forecasted an earthquake of a much smaller intensity.
April 25 2015	An intense earthquake of a 7.8 magnitude struck Nepal near its capital Kathmandu affecting over 8 million lives and causing thousands of deaths and injuries.
May 12 2015	One of the aftermaths of the Nepal earthquake was centered in the city of Kathmandu and reached a magnitude of 7.3 resulting in several deaths and over thousand people suffering from injuries.

## Relevant UN Treaties, Resolutions and Events

### Panel discussion on "Disaster Resilience and Disability: Ensuring Equality and Inclusion"

On the International Day of Disaster Reduction of 2013, which was the 10 October 2013, a panel discussion was held at the Headquarters of the United Nations in New York, in order to form an international set of measures and guidelines that would be put into practice following 2015 and would ensure that the rights of disabled persons would be taken into account in disaster risk reduction.

### Panel Discussion on "The Promise of Technology: Disability-Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction and Humanitarian Action"

During the 2014 International Day of Persons with Disabilities, on 3 December 2014, the UN held a panel discussion aiming to promote the efficient use

of technology when faced with an emergency that demands preparation, planning and the provision of humanitarian aid, in order to satisfy the needs of disabled people for aid and supplies in such situations.

### Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRDP)

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was drafted on 13 December 2006 and signed on 30 March 2007. The 11<sup>th</sup> Article of the Convention focuses on the rights of disabled persons during “Situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies”, while Article 26 refers to their right to rehabilitation and habilitation services.

### **Previous Attempts to solve the Issue**

Programs and organizations aiming to support the rights and lives of persons with disabilities that also focus on emergency preparedness have been founded in many countries, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the US and the Red Cross. Several countries have also tried to implement laws protecting such people but failed, like Iraq. There have also been relevant UN resolutions and conventions (Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities) but not many countries have successfully implemented such measures or drastically improved their infrastructure in order to ensure the safety of person with disabilities in emergencies and their equal treatment.

### **Possible Solutions**

In order to establish a safer environment for persons with disabilities during an emergency situation it is important to change each society's perception and make it adjust to the needs of such people instead of expecting them to conform to their society's rules and values. It has already been observed that the term “disability” is partly shifting from the medical meaning that it carried until now to a more societal one, which means that its definition is dependent on the way a person with a physical or mental condition interacts with their surroundings. Therefore, if countries worldwide realized the importance of that consideration they would view disabled people differently and work towards creating an environment that would better support them in such situations. If such an accomplishment is achieved through national and international campaigns both in the developed and developing world, where the majority of disabled people are observed and the priorities are different, a large portion of the existing hesitations about reconstructing parts of already existing infrastructure and reevaluating the foundations of a society would be resolved.



It is also important to use such campaigns, in order to debunk myths considering the treatment and acceptance of people with disabilities into shelters during an emergency. As it was mentioned before there are irrational theories deeming medical treatment and operations on disabled people more complex, expensive and time-consuming than those conducted on the rest of the population, which lead to a large percentage of such persons to be denied medical care and rehabilitation, as well as access to shelters.



**Figure 1.1: Victims of the earthquake in Dhading Besi, Nepal receive aid outside the Dhading hospital, which was at the time overcrowded.**

Furthermore, one of the most important points for this matter should also be addressed - infrastructure. National and international efforts should be made in order to improve infrastructure as a means of emergency preparedness seeing as inadequate infrastructure leads to a more hostile environment for disabled people in states of emergency.

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