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Mainstreaming Disability in Humanitarian Action

A Field Study from Cox's Bazar,
Bangladesh

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Executive Summary

Disability inclusion is crucial to effective humanitarian action. Since the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), disability has been firmly established as a human rights issue and key donors make it a prerequisite for funding. Many humanitarian organizations have also committed themselves to including persons with disabilities in their work in line with the core humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence (for example, by signing the Charter on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action). In daily practice, however, the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities is still lagging behind.

In Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, more than 870,000 refugees have found shelter after fleeing from Myanmar. While all of them live in dire conditions, persons with disabilities face even more severe barriers in accessing humanitarian services and participating in the humanitarian response. To ensure the inclusion and protection of persons with disabilities, humanitarian actors have been increasingly reaching out to disability-focused organizations for technical support and capacity-building. Some organizations have also entered into strategic partnerships or formed consortia projects with disability-focused organizations to systematically build up their capacities on inclusion. Three disability-focused organizations (Humanity & Inclusion (HI), Christian Blind Mission (CBM) and the Centre for Disability in Development (CDD)) and HelpAge International established the Age and Disability Working Group (ADWG) to promote the inclusion of older persons and persons with disabilities within the wider humanitarian response by providing technical support to the coordination mechanism (clusters). Despite these efforts, the inclusion of persons with disabilities remains an ongoing challenge.

Research in Cox's Bazar demonstrates that many organizations have only just started to build their capacity and thus lack expertise on how to ensure the inclusion of persons with disabilities throughout their programmes. Despite some level of commitment from numerous humanitarian actors, as evidenced though their signing of the Charter on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action, a systematic approach to ensuring the inclusion of persons

with disabilities in their organizations, programmes and services is still lacking. In fact, the inclusion of persons with disabilities most often depends on the initiatives and motivations of a few individuals within the organizations. Moreover, there are still insufficient financial resources allocated to inclusive humanitarian action. This is a problem in Cox's Bazar, where humanitarian actors require considerable resources to address past failures in the planning and construction of the camp's infrastructure. To make services accessible for everyone, roads, facilities and shelters must be remodelled. Yet short funding cycles, frequent staff turnover and administrative procedures that entail a high workload for humanitarian staff reduce the time and resources needed to create an inclusive environment and ensure the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities. These issues take away time that could be spent on building the capacity of humanitarian staff.

To ensure the inclusion of persons with disabilities, it is crucial that donors guarantee sustainable and reliable funding. This will allow organizations to focus on capacity-building and make the necessary investments to build an accessible environment. Humanitarian actors should promote the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities, collect, analyse, use and share data disaggregated by age, gender and disability, reduce attitudinal, environmental and institutional barriers, identify good practices and learn from one another's experiences. Ideally, the Government of Bangladesh and humanitarian actors will facilitate longer-term programming to contribute to the inclusion of persons with disabilities in humanitarian services until a return of the Rohingya to Myanmar becomes possible (see Reliefweb, 2020).

For future humanitarian crises, it is crucial that more attention is directed towards capacity-building at the headquarters level of humanitarian organizations. Disability inclusion is a strategic issue for the whole organization, and headquarters therefore need to promote a policy on age, gender and diversity in all operations. This will enhance equality, foster non-discrimination and ensure the systematic incorporation of persons with disabilities in humanitarian activities at all stages of the humanitarian response (preparedness, response and recovery).

Key Points

- Persons with disabilities face many barriers in accessing humanitarian services.
- During the immediate Rohingya crisis response in 2017 and 2018, humanitarian actors did not consider the rights and specific requirements of persons with disabilities.
- The camps' infrastructure has been developed in such a way that persons with disabilities face many barriers and cannot easily benefit from the humanitarian response.
- Humanitarian actors recognize the need to reduce attitudinal, environmental and institutional barriers and are striving to become more inclusive in their work.
- Humanitarian actors are increasingly reaching out and collaborating with disability-focused organizations and establishing formal partnerships and consortia. Nevertheless, the actual inclusion of persons with disabilities remains an ongoing challenge as they often continue to be excluded and left behind.
- **Donors** have short funding cycles, which prevent long-term planning and activities. Reliable and flexible funding are crucial for successful disability mainstreaming.
- Relaxation of approval requirements by the relevant government **authorities** will enable humanitarian actors to spend more time on capacity-building and technical support.
- **International humanitarian organizations** lack the capacity to mainstream disability into their programmes. Building internal capacity at headquarters, the programme level and in the field and developing and closely monitoring the implementation of long-term strategies and action plans reduces the risk of the inclusion of persons with disabilities remaining in the hands of only a few individuals.

- **National and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs)** make a vital contribution to the humanitarian response, but as is the case with international organizations, need to build their capacities on disability mainstreaming and gradually assume a leading role in the response.
- The work of **disability-focused NGOs** in providing targeted assistance to persons with disabilities and in building the capacity of various humanitarian partner organizations to include persons with disabilities remains key to protecting their rights and enabling their participation in the humanitarian response.
- **Persons with disabilities** need to become familiar with their rights and be empowered to speak up for themselves. In the host communities they have the right to form organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs). In the camps, persons with disabilities sometimes form informal disability committees. Organizations should encourage the formation of more informal groups and strengthen their capacity to meaningfully participate and contribute to matters of their concern inside the camps. Enjoying their right to form OPDs would enable persons with disabilities to specify their preferred ways of inclusion.
- The **ADWG** is an initiative of HI, CBM, CDD and HelpAge International. Thanks to collaboration with the protection sector, the ADWG strongly contributes to age and disability inclusion in the humanitarian response. A joint registration exercise with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the REACH Initiative will be a first step in closing important data gaps and enhancing the visibility of persons with disabilities. However, sustained advocacy of their human rights in different clusters and capacity-building on inclusion remain necessary to support long-term change.
- Strategic partnerships and consortia projects with **disability-focused NGOs** are evaluated positively in this study but their overall long-term impact is still hard to assess.

- Disability-inclusive humanitarian action is an under-researched topic. More long-term ethnographic and impact studies as well as a comprehensive review of the compliance with and implementation of international normative instruments on the inclusion of persons with disabilities are necessary to better inform daily practice.

Research Methods

The report takes an explorative and qualitative approach due to the limited availability of ethnographic and impact studies on how humanitarian actors mainstream disability into their work and lack of large-scale studies on staff and organizational behaviour. The use of a qualitative research strategy allows for a nuanced understanding of practices and local dynamics that either encourage or limit the inclusion of persons with disabilities in humanitarian programmes, organizational structures and the wider humanitarian coordination system. Research in Cox's Bazar was carried out for four weeks in January and February 2020. It involved: key informant interviews with 32 individuals from 18 organizations; one focus group discussion with eight field staff from an international mainstream humanitarian NGO working in protection in the refugee camps and host communities in Teknaf and Ukhiya; and participant observations in three HI team meetings, one meeting of the Protection Cluster Working Group led by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and one meeting of the ADWG. It also included *field visits* to Camp 17 and Kutupalong RC10 with HI staff, along with visits to Camps 13, 15 and 19 and to the host community in Ukhiya with the CDD. Two Skype interviews with a representative from a disability-focused organization and one local government entity were conducted in October 2020 and January 2021. The study also included a *review of internal HI and CBM documents* (reports, internal evaluations, project proposals), which covered current and previous projects on disability-inclusive humanitarian action in Cox's Bazar. Data was analysed using *MAXQDA*. Semantic categories were deductively derived from international tools that promote the inclusion of persons with disabilities in humanitarian action and from the interview guide.

