People with disabilities are highly vulnerable in disaster, emergency or conflict situations. They may be left behind if they aren’t physically able to evacuate, they may not be properly informed of what is going on, they may lose their assistive devices and means of independence, or they may struggle to access shelters, camps, and food distribution sites.

More than half a billion people with disabilities live in countries often affected by conflicts and natural disasters. Following a disaster, the World Health Organization estimates that 5-7 percent of people in camps or temporary shelters have a disability. After the cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in 2008, a survey indicates that there were very few shelters accessible to persons with disabilities. None of the relief organisations involved in emergency shelter programs took specific measures to ensure access to persons with disabilities. The lack of pre-existing data about persons with disabilities was a key element of their invisibility, and this is similar to every crisis. (The Leprosy Mission International, Myanmar Nargis Special Intervention Project, 2008/2009).

There is also a potential for discrimination on the basis of disability when resources are scarce. Children, women and, especially, older persons with disabilities may find themselves abandoned by family members, whose resources are already limited, and they are no longer able to care for dependent, older family members. People with disabilities may therefore face extreme isolation and vulnerability in displacement situations and may be unable to access basic healthcare, food and shelter, that is necessary in order to survive (“Disabilities among refugees and conflict affected populations”, The Women’s Refugee Commission, June 2008).

Women, children and elderly with disabilities are particularly vulnerable groups whose needs should be included at all stages of disaster management.

Most at risk in emergency situations

For every child killed in conflict, three are injured and permanently impaired (IFRC)

Negative attitudes towards disabled people are heightened in situations of conflict and emergencies

Haiti earthquake 2010

“If people with a disability are ever going to be included in mainstream society in Haiti, the attitude of the general public towards disability has to be changed first”

Dr. Michel Pean, State Secretary for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities

The Haitian Government estimates that the number of people with disabilities in Haiti may have risen from 800,000 to 1.1 million following the earthquake.

10 year old Sebastian navigates a drainage ditch in a tent city outside Port-au-Prince. Sebastian’s mother was killed and he lost his right leg when their house collapsed during the earthquake. Sebastian was trapped for three days. He now lives in the tent city with his aunt, uncle and four cousins and loves to play football.

Photo: CBM/Shelley.

See the photo exhibition “Disability and Emergencies” at www.cbm.org.
Disasters and crises leads to disability

The impact of the Gaza war in 2009 and the Haiti earthquake in 2010 has been broadcasted to us through media, and has showed how civilians have been maimed for life. Those affected by such crises and disasters will often have a life long need for rehabilitation and for reintegration in their societies.

The focus immediately after a disaster or during conflicts is to get the necessary medical attention to those in need, in order for them to survive. Many new people will become disabled for the rest of their lives.

As survivors they need to start the long process of getting back into society, finding a job, finding ways to cope, maybe experience discrimination and face the reality of having a disability.

Good planning

Lack of preparation and planning is, together with inaccessible facilities and services, a major reason that persons with disabilities are more likely to be left behind or abandoned during evacuation in disasters and conflicts.

Several studies show that including the needs and voices of persons with disabilities at all stages of the disaster management process, especially in the planning, can significantly reduce their vulnerability and increase the effectiveness of emergency operations. (UN Enable)

Reconstruction and accessibility

Reconstruction after natural disasters and war, may, if planned, result in more appropriate and accessible infrastructure.

Reconstruction and city planning of public buildings, water and sanitation and other important public infrastructure are golden opportunities to make society more accessible.

Accessibility is not only welcomed by disabled people, but may also help elderly people, small children and other vulnerable groups to access public facilities.

Gaza war 2009

Hadeel El-Samuni is thirteen years old and lives in an area that was highly targeted during the Gaza war.

At dawn, 11th of January 2009, Hadeel's home was directly targeted by chemical weapons. Hadeel was found under the ruins of the two-story apartment building. She was seriously injured, suffering from aphasia and being partly paralyzed.

With help from neighbours, the family managed to get her to hospital in Egypt. She was in a coma for 25 days. After six months of intense rehabilitation she manages to talk and walk without help and she is back at school in Gaza.


Universal Design

Universal design refers to broad-spectrum architectural planning ideas meant to produce buildings, products and environments that are inherently accessible to both the able-bodied and the physically disabled (Wikipedia).

CBM

CBM is an international Christian development organization committed to improving the quality of life of people living with disabilities in low income regions of the world.