Conceptualising forced migration through the prism of disability

Understanding and Measuring Safe Migration
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Defining Disability

• The UN Convention on the Rights of Person’s with Disabilities (2008) defines disability as including: those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

• Wide ranging and for the first time including mental ill health within a definition of disability

• Social model of disability as point of departure, where disability is constructed in social structures which serve to exclude, notwithstanding impairment affect

• Hidden impairments

• Acquired impairments – physical, psychosocial, mental ill health

*What has been seen cannot be unseen*
Counting disabled refugees

• World Health Organisation (WHO) – estimates 15% of any population will be people with impairments

• Unprecedented numbers of displaced persons globally; estimates at rate of 15% means that those with impairments number into the millions

• Yet very little scholarly attention to disabled migrants

• Collecting data on the numbers and characteristics of disabled refugees can assist with humanitarian planning

• UNHCR Global Registration Database – estimates disabled migrants at 7% (Pease 2015) – lower than global estimates

• Disability organisations use different definitions of disability reflecting those using their services, but not useful for country wide planning
Points to bear in mind

• Disabled people remain amongst the most discriminated against, excluded and vulnerable groups in society – migration compounds and multiplies the issues that people typically face

• Disabled people, those with chronic illnesses, the elderly – people who would not have typically featured as migrants are being forced to flee in situations of conflict

• Disabled people are also those who are often those who are left behind

• The role of culture in the construction / interpretation of disability
  • Need to consider this in designing responses to disabled people
Three themes to consider

1. Key safety and protection concerns of disabled people affected by displacement

2. Gaps and approaches to disability inclusion in humanitarian organisations

3. Potential strategies to strengthen access and the inclusion of disabled persons
Protection concerns

1. Lack of access to health care
2. Risks associated with multiple impairments
3. Violence and abuse
4. Stigma, discrimination, exclusion, bullying
5. Transportation
6. Community Participation and decision making
Disability inclusive humanitarian programming

  • However, principle based – lack specific practical guidelines

• Pearce (2015) reported on consultation with 134 humanitarian organisations in 7 countries – 22 had specific programmes for disabled refugees:
  • Physical rehabilitation/assistive devices
  • Sign language programme
  • Representative organisations
  • Livelihood and skills training
  • Special education

• Individual leadership not institutionalised within systems and processes
Strategies to strength access and inclusion

• Identification

• Awareness

• Representation

• Development of practical guidance from principle based documents
  • E.g. Women’s Refugee Council workshops with UNHCR country offices (Pearse 2015)

• Contact with DPO’s in receiving countries

• Elevate voice of disabled displaced people
If policies, guidelines, strategies for all migrants are designed with disabled migrants in mind, then everyone is likely to benefit.