Guest Editors

Dr. Floriane Clement
Senior researcher and IWMI Gender Focal Point, International Water Management Institute, Nepal

Sylvie Cordier
Disability and Development Specialist, United Kingdom

Dr. Alan Nicol
Strategic Program Leader - Promoting Sustainable Growth, International Water Management Institute, East Africa

Chief Editor

Dr. Anjal Prakash
Programme Coordinator – HI-AWARE, International Center for Integrated Mountain Development, Nepal

Managing Editor

Monica Priya
Research Associate, South Asia Consortium for Interdisciplinary Water Resources Studies, India
Disability and Disaster: What is the link?

Ilan Kelman and Laura M. Stough. Springer. 2015

Hannah Kuper
Director, International Centre for Evidence in Disability, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London
Email: hannah.kuper@lshtm.ac.uk

Disasters are constantly in the news. This broad label covers a wide range of events. Some disasters are caused by people, like the ongoing war in Syria, the Boko Haram insurgency or the crisis in Yemen. Others come about through natural phenomena, such as the recent earthquakes in Italy and New Zealand, or the chaos caused by Hurricane Matthew. Often, disasters have their roots in both human and natural causes. Disasters may be short-lived or persist over decades; they can be localized or widespread. Two things are clear, disasters will become increasingly common in the face of climate change and global population growth, and disasters will inevitably include people with disabilities.

The WHO estimates that there are one billion people with disabilities in the world (WHO, 2011). This section of population is, on average, older, more likely to be poor, and face a range of exclusions, such as from jobs, education, and health care (WHO, 2011). This means that people with disabilities will be particularly vulnerable in disaster situations, with a greater chance of being injured during a disaster and facing more difficulty in accessing disaster relief programmes. It is therefore important to explore the challenges facing people with disabilities in disasters, in order to ensure that they are protected at such crucial times, and are fully included in relief efforts. This is the central theme of “Disability and Disaster; Explorations and Exchanges”, edited by Ilan Kleman and Laura M. Stough. (Kelman and Stough, 2015)

The first section of the book describes frameworks for considering the vulnerabilities that people with disabilities face in disasters and the ways in which these can be mitigated. The chapter by Alexander discusses what is meant by disability, why people with disabilities may be vulnerable in disasters, and what legal safeguards are in place to protect them during disasters. The chapter by Phillips provides a useful framework for emergency management, and how it can be made more inclusive for people with disabilities, providing rich concrete suggestions, though mostly focussed on USA. Alexander and Phillips both emphasise the importance of thinking about disability before the disaster, rather than in the midst of a crisis. Their job is hindered, however, by a lack of data required in this area to show the level of vulnerability and exclusion of people with disabilities in disasters, as well as a lack of evidence on what works to mitigate their susceptibility.

The book shifts gear in the second part, which is a string of strong narratives of people with disabilities about disasters. These very human stories provide a range of examples of the challenges they face in times of disasters. The narratives are provoking and feature the voices of strong people trying to live the lives they wanted - rather than passively accepting what is on offer. The different voices tell stories of an array of challenges and experiences. These stories include a woman’s experience of escaping a forest fire in Texas, narratives about the impacts of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, and on to the tale of a young Vietnamese boy in the midst of the war, which ultimately ends well… in Norway of all places. The perspectives shared are both of people who had developed their disability as a result of disaster, as well as of people with disabilities who had lived through disasters.

The vignettes are not only of people who have experienced disasters, but also of people who have shared their fear of potential disasters and their views on how they believed they would cope in such dire situations. Others reflected on the day-to-day realities of living with disabilities, and the great need to be organised and prepared, without which they would be a lot more vulnerable in face of disasters, even apparently minor ones. As one author notes “I do not have to wait for the killing disasters to strike me. Being in public spaces is already disastrous.” These narratives seemed less relevant to the general
theme, as they focussed more on general life rather than on disasters, but still offered some important insights.

There were common messages across the narratives. Vulnerability of people with disabilities in disasters arises from both their physical and social susceptibility. Physical impairments can make evacuation more difficult during emergencies, whether from a fire in a Brazil nightclub or from rebels in Colombia; a lack of money can further their vulnerability by making it difficult for them to cope with disasters. The account of the boy in Vietnam described his vulnerability not only as a result of his physical impairments, but also because of the fact that he had been abandoned by his family. There are also important lessons regarding the means to include people with disabilities in disaster response. The changes needed to make disaster response more inclusive are often small, and start with creating awareness of disability in the disaster sector. Preparation is clearly the key. The stories repeatedly confirm the importance of thinking about disability before the disaster rather than in the midst of it and demonstrate that drills and other provisions are vital. The narratives conflicted, however, on whether this preparation was the responsibility of the person with disabilities or of the service providers. Designs of inclusive emergency plans should ensure that appropriate accommodations are made so that people with disabilities can be included in emergency response, as is their right, rather than making them dependent or infantilising them. The narratives also make it clear that people with disabilities need to be included within the planning process in order to make it inclusive. An important subsequent step is to ensure that the rebuilding process is taken as an opportunity to make societies more accessible, though this is not considered in detail in the book.

There were some gaps in the narratives. Many of the examples were from the USA, and the voices of people with mental health conditions or intellectual impairment were not prominent. What was also brought out is that there are key gaps in the evidence, regarding both the vulnerability of people with disabilities in disasters, as well as what is to be done about it. Most of the statistics cited were from USA and Japan, with little quantitative data available from the poorer parts of the world. The book provides a clear call to action to focus on disability and disaster. More research is now needed to fill the evidence gaps and move the theory into positive action.

References

