

On the Edge

Why older people's needs are not being met in humanitarian emergencies



‘The humanitarian system is poorly equipped to ensure an equitable response for the most vulnerable. Whilst issues specific to children, age, old people, women and those with disability are widely written about, there are few mechanisms to deal with them.’

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Introduction

When disaster strikes, older people are among the most vulnerable to neglect, injury, death and disease. Yet their needs are often overlooked. In crises, Age UK and HelpAge International provide support to older people who have been affected and ensure that their interests are represented and their contributions recognised.

In the past ten years alone, we have provided assistance to people in later life following natural disasters, conflict and displacement in areas such as Darfur, Pakistan, and Ethiopia.

Together, Age UK and HelpAge International are committed to increasing the impact of our emergency relief work. But we cannot do this alone. The UK Government, political leaders and UK-based humanitarian actors all have a vital role to play. This report sets out the scale and nature of the problem and makes recommendations for change.

Myths about older people in emergencies

- **There are no older people in developing countries.**

Low life expectancy figures mask the fact that there are millions of older people in developing countries. The most rapid increase in the 60+ population is occurring in the developing world, which will see a jump of 225 per cent (to over 1.5 billion people) between 2010 and 2050. Furthermore, 26 million older people are affected by disasters every year.

- **The extended family and community will always protect them.**

Migration and urbanisation means that the extended family is no longer as common as it once was. Some older people do not have families; others are caring for orphaned grandchildren. People may not have the resources or ability to help others at a time when they are also suffering.

- **A humanitarian agency will look after them.**
There are no United Nations agencies and very few international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) dedicated to older people.

- **They will be covered by general aid distributions.**

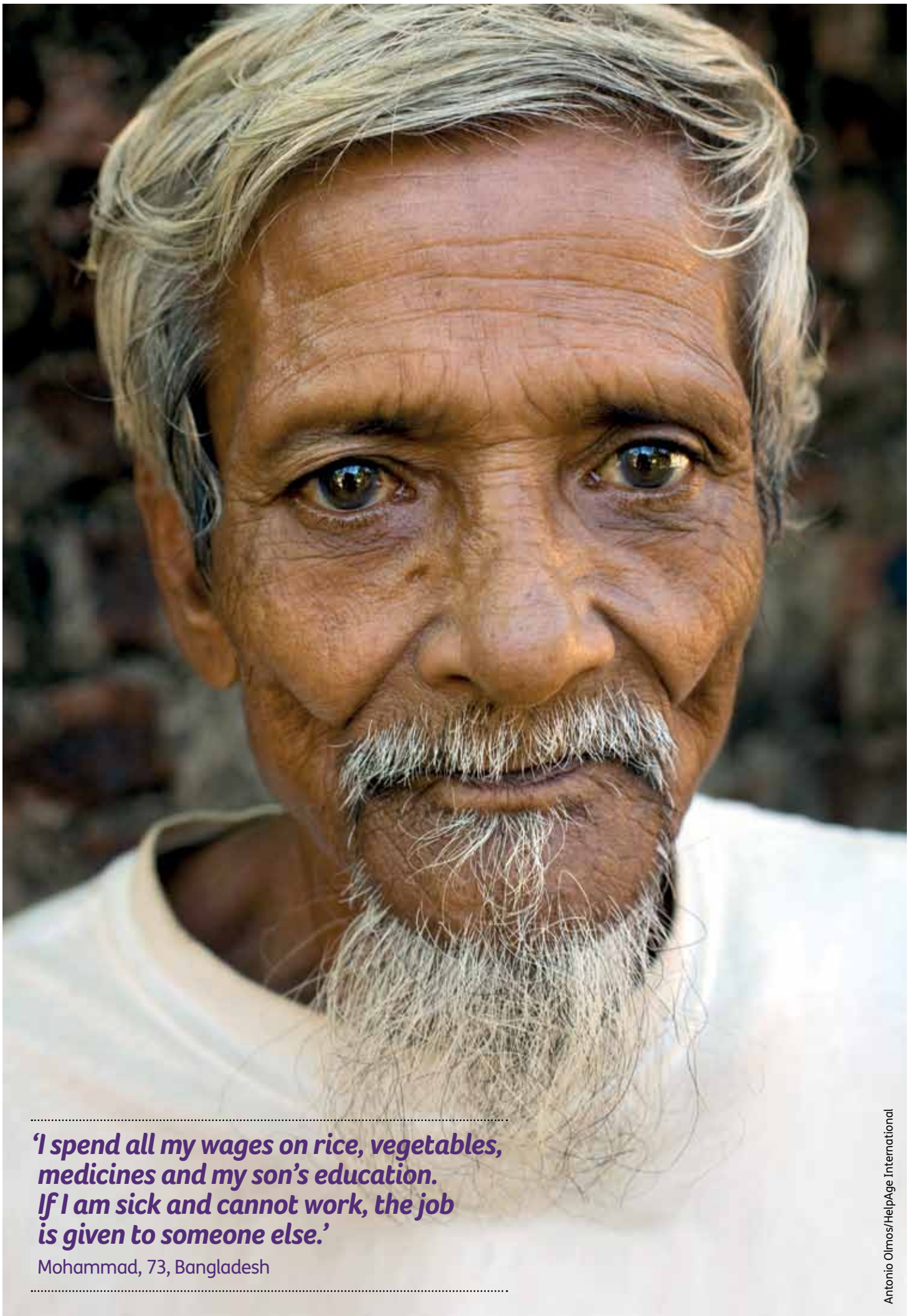
Older people have particular nutritional, cultural and health needs that are often not met by a general relief distribution. Sick and frail people might find it difficult to queue at or walk to relief distribution points, so they may not be able to access general aid distributions in the first place.

- **They only have themselves to worry about.**

Many older people are looking after grandchildren as their children migrate in search of work or die through conflict and illness. We estimate that up to half of the world's children orphaned by AIDS are cared for by a grandparent.

'I thought my children would come to see me after the disaster struck the area, but I was wrong. They don't care. I shouldn't expect anything from them any more.'

Bass, 75, Pakistan, following the floods



***'I spend all my wages on rice, vegetables,
medicines and my son's education.
If I am sick and cannot work, the job
is given to someone else.'***

Mohammad, 73, Bangladesh

Making older people visible in emergencies

People in later life are particularly vulnerable in emergency situations. Lack of mobility and social isolation can prevent older people from accessing relief assistance. They may not be able to queue for aid packages or travel long distances to reach camps for displaced people. They often have specific needs that aren't met; for example, related to their health, nutrition or livelihood.

This problem is compounded by the fact that older people are often overlooked by governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) alike. Perumal in Sri Lanka told us that he had not bothered queuing for food when assistance arrived after the devastating tsunami in Asia in 2004. He said: 'I have been pushed out on earlier occasions and have fallen on the ground. I know I will get nothing this time round too. The fastest get the food, the strongest wins. Older people and the injured don't get anything.'

Age UK and HelpAge International are encouraged that the UK public is still committed to helping people following humanitarian emergencies, despite the current financial crisis. As the 2010 report *Public Attitudes towards Development* by the Department for International Development (DFID) notes: 'Although overall the proportion personally donating to charities decreased, there was a significant increase in those who donated to charities which help victims of natural or man-made disasters.'

We welcome the cross-party commitment to overseas development and emergency relief in Westminster and are proud that the UK is already highly rated for its humanitarian deployments. DFID's new priorities for humanitarian and emergency relief should go far in carrying this good work forward. In particular, we welcome DFID's promise to honour 'international commitments that firmly root our response in the principles of humanity,

neutrality and impartiality' and its desire to 'work with others to establish a single set of common accountability standards, which require participation of the most vulnerable groups (women, children, old people and disabled people)'.

Age UK and HelpAge International encourage DFID to do more for older people as a vulnerable group. We believe that older people should hold the Government to account on the assistance they receive, but the Government also has to ensure that funds are allocated and targeted to those in greatest need. Strong efforts should be made to improve the performance of the UN co-ordination system, so that it can deliver on its commitments to meeting the needs of all vulnerable groups, including older people. As agencies working together, Age UK and HelpAge International ensure that older people affected by crises and disasters receive the assistance and protection they deserve and need. HelpAge International is the only international organisation working specifically to ensure that older people receive emergency assistance. Age UK is proud to support HelpAge International in this invaluable work and is also proud to be a member of the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC).

We know that we can achieve many things for older people following emergencies. We also know that by collaborating with other aid agencies and DFID, we can achieve much more. The UK humanitarian community needs to work together to make older people visible and ensure that their needs and contributions are not overlooked.



Tom Wright CBE
Group Chief Executive
Age UK



Richard Blewitt
Chief Executive,
HelpAge International

***'Most people who left Jada went to Chad
but me and my sister were too old to walk
there, and my legs get very sore, so we
came to this camp instead.'***

Halima, age unknown, Darfur



What is the problem?

Older people are particularly vulnerable and face specific threats from man-made and natural disasters. Their needs are very different from those of children or the more able-bodied. Governments and NGOs need to recognise these specific needs and not assume that they will be met through general aid programmes.

Restricted mobility and increased vulnerability

Older age brings reduced mobility and muscle strength, impaired sight and hearing, and greater vulnerability to heat and cold. Minor conditions can quickly become major handicaps that overwhelm a person's ability to cope.

When communities flee to safety, many frail or housebound older people are less able or willing to flee quickly or protect themselves from harm. Older people can struggle to obtain food, travel long distances or endure even short periods without shelter.

When they do flee, many people in later life cannot move as quickly as others; nor are they strong enough to carry many possessions.

Inappropriate food

Emergency food distribution programmes are often targeted at women and children. They are rarely adjusted to include the particular needs of older people and their specific dietary requirements. Older people need micronutrients, protein and food that is easy to digest.

Rations can be too heavy to carry; packaging too difficult to open. Food aid can be difficult to prepare if people do not have cooking utensils. Many older people report being pushed out of the way by more able-bodied people. After the 2010 floods in Pakistan, 70-year-old Sultana told us: 'As I was waiting in the queue for my turn to receive food, somebody punched me in the face and knocked me unconscious. All this, just to get ahead of me.'



Older people are often pushed out of the way during the chaos of emergency relief distribution.

Photograph: John Cobb/Age UK and HelpAge International

Inadequate healthcare

Immediately following a disaster, health services must focus on first aid. However, in the medium term, health services need to respond to the ongoing needs of older people. Walking sticks and frames, hearing aids and glasses can make all the difference in enabling older people to reach distribution points, access assistance, prepare food or collect firewood for cooking or heating. Sixty-year-old Ghulam in Pakistan hardly ever leaves his home: 'I am unable to walk and have been bedridden for the last two years due to my weak bones.'

People in later life also need healthcare for the treatment for chronic conditions that are more prevalent in older age, such as coronary heart disease, diabetes, stroke, respiratory illnesses, rheumatism and dementia. These conditions deteriorate without routine assessment and treatment.

Trauma and isolation

Loss of family members, carers and community ties can leave older people isolated. Many older people live alone, especially widowed women. For many survivors, the most difficult aspect of disaster is coping with day-to-day life afterwards. Some older people report feeling depressed at losing the status they once had in their community. In 2003, Mohamed, his wife and their ten children were forced from their home in West Darfur, Sudan, when conflict reached their village. Mohamed said: 'It was a tragic day. I lost everything I had, including my animals.' He and his family went to live in a camp for internally displaced people, where they became dependent upon humanitarian aid. Mohamed said:

'I felt I was no longer respected in society. I felt helpless in front of my family and the rest of my relatives in the camp.'

Loss of livelihoods

Eighty per cent of older people in developing countries have no regular income. Less than 5 per cent receive a pension. Many older people have no choice but to work until the day they die. However, older people are often excluded from 'cash for work' or 'food for work' recovery programmes because most aid agencies target younger adults. Micro-credit and other activities that can help older people earn a living are often planned without considering their capabilities.

When communities return home from a disaster, older people typically face difficulties in accessing land and other scarce resources. Gamar lives in a camp for internally displaced people in Darfur, Sudan. He said: 'We have to stay here until things are safer and we can return home. But even when we do, to rebuild everything is going to be hard. We will have to start from the beginning. We won't even have seeds to plant.'



Gamar living in a camp for internally displaced people in Darfur, Sudan.

Photograph: Kate Holt/HelpAge International

***'The weather has changed completely.
There used to be a lot more rain previously
but now it is dry. The weather started
changing about 30 years ago.'***

Abdulla, 99, Ethiopia, following the drought



Fact file

Climate change means an increasing frequency and intensity of floods, storms and droughts, resulting in scarcities of land, water and energy.

At the same time food crises are affecting many countries around the world and are likely to worsen with the continuing global economic crisis. As if that were not enough, growing urbanisation is causing many more people to live in high-risk areas, such as flood plains. And one-third of humanitarian disasters are caused by violent conflict. Increasing competition for water and agricultural land will only exacerbate this. We are all faced with various problems that – without concerted action from governments and NGOs alike – are only going to get worse.



Sher says everyone lost everything following the floods in Pakistan.

Photograph: Mohammad Khalid Riaz/HelpAge International

Ageing population

- Currently people aged 60 and over represent 11.4 per cent of the total world population (794 million); by 2050, the number is predicted to rise to 22 per cent (2 billion).¹
- By 2015, there will be more people aged 60 and over than aged 14 and under.²
- The most rapid increase in the 60+ population is occurring in the developing world, which will see a jump of 225 per cent (to over 1.5 billion) between 2010 and 2050.³
- By 2050, more than 80 per cent of older people will live in developing countries – where disasters are more likely to occur and the effect to be greater – compared with 60 per cent today.⁴
- Demographic change means that the number of older people affected by emergencies is growing fast.

Emergencies and disasters

- Disasters disproportionately affect poorer countries – 97 per cent of people killed by disasters live in developing countries.⁵
- 26 million older people are affected by natural disasters every year.⁶
- Climate-related disasters are increasing: the first four years of the 21st century saw an average of 326 disasters a year – a doubling in 20 years.⁷
- Older people often make up a high proportion of people in displaced people's camps. In Gulu District of Northern Uganda, 65 per cent of people still living in displaced people's camps in 2009 were aged over 60.⁸
- Only 0.2 per cent of UN Flash Appeals for humanitarian relief actually target older people.⁹

What is our response?

To ensure that the interests of older people are represented and met during crises, Age UK funds HelpAge International to support local partner organisations to deliver age-friendly aid. HelpAge deploys specialist staff who provide training and resource materials about older people's needs to other aid agencies, give health and social support to older people living in refugee camps, and work with communities in disaster-prone areas to prepare for future emergencies by training and equipping networks of older volunteers.

What we do following an emergency

- **Identify older people**

Carry out a rapid needs assessment, collect and analyse data broken down by age and gender.

- **Consult them**

Ask people in later life what they need, and represent their interests. In the recovery stage, set up Older People's Associations (OPAs) so that older people can support themselves and others.

- **Make distributions accessible**

Ensure that there are seats for those who cannot stand for long periods. Organise separate distributions for older women and men where this is culturally appropriate.

- **Deliver age-appropriate emergency relief**

Ensure that food and non-food items are appropriate for older people. For example, ensure that contents take into account the difficulty that older people may have in chewing, digesting and absorbing nutrients; design packages so that they can be easily carried and opened.

- **Provide age-appropriate healthcare**

Provide specialist staff in existing health facilities, deliver basic training in gerontology, distribute equipment such as mobility aids and glasses, and provide medication for chronic illnesses.

- **Provide financial support**

Offer age-appropriate work, grants or loans for those who can work, and cash transfers to those who can not.

- **Offer psychological support**

Employ psychologists and recruit home-care volunteers to help older people recover from the trauma of disasters and conflict.

- **Provide protection**

If older people have been separated from their families, or are already alone, ensure that they are involved in family tracing and re-unification programmes.

- **Help communities prepare themselves against future disasters**

Ensure that older people – with historical knowledge – are included in disaster-risk reduction work so that they can help their communities to prepare for future disasters.

Many parts of Africa suffer from frequent droughts. We have helped strengthen the resilience of communities with whom we work by providing drought-resistant crops in Mozambique and water supplies in Ethiopia. This way we can help avert famines that have so often plagued East Africa. The disaster-risk-reduction work of many NGOs, including HelpAge International, was instrumental in ensuring that the 2011 drought crisis in East Africa was not as severe as it could have been.

In Borana, Ethiopia, we built a reservoir and a water point. When residents still have water in their own 'haro' (water pond), they use this. But when these dry up, they now have other sources of clean water. Sixty-four-year-old Teso said: 'Without the water, we would be dead within two months once the haro dries up. The haro are not enough for the population. The well water is also cleaner.'

***'I am glad that you haven't forgotten us.
There are not only children in Ethiopia,
but older people too.'***

Teso, 64, Ethiopia, following the drought



Adna is the treasurer of an Older People's Association (OPA) in Haiti. She has no children of her own, but looks after five adopted children. She used to have a small business selling clothes but lost everything in the 2010 earthquake. Now she earns a living as a HelpAge carer in one of the camps for displaced people in Port-au-Prince.

Adna said: 'When I see older people in the street begging, it breaks my heart. When HelpAge came it really made me feel like my dreams had come true. Older people here would be in even bigger trouble if HelpAge wasn't here. It's a good thing, because we did not think of the older people before. Because of the Older People's Associations, older people will be recognised by the government and can have a bigger impact.'

What we do throughout the year

HelpAge is building a strong evidence base on the impact of humanitarian crises on older people and using this research to help humanitarian relief and aid workers to understand how emergencies and crises affect older people. HelpAge is also developing technical guidance materials in key areas, such as displacement, cash transfers and livelihoods, health and protection, drawing on good practice developed by our own programmes and those of other agencies.

It is also ensuring that local partners around the world are helping people in later life to set up Older People's Associations (OPAs), so that older people can help themselves and others in their family and community, as well as integrating disaster risk reduction in their programmes. HelpAge is working with other humanitarian agencies and national governments in developing countries to help them mainstream ageing issues in their policies and programmes.

Following the floods in Pakistan in 2010, HelpAge set up a number of Older People's Associations (OPAs). Sixty-year-old Sher said:

'We made a list of the most vulnerable older people, including widows and those living alone. We then selected the villagers most in need of the cash grant. But the OPAs are not just for giving money. People come to talk about their problems and as members we support them.'

What is the response of the humanitarian community?

In recent years, various principles, guidelines and policy levers have been agreed that have the potential to bring about significant improvements in the humanitarian community's response to older people in emergencies. We would urge other humanitarian agencies and policy-makers to respond.

The principle of impartiality

The principle of humanitarian impartiality – that everyone has a right to humanitarian assistance regardless of race, nationality, political ideology or affiliation, religion, gender or age – is the basic tenet under that almost all humanitarian actors claim to operate. However, our research shows that the particular needs of older people as a vulnerable group are not usually included in consultations and assessments and do not receive appropriate humanitarian assistance. NGOs need to recognise that the principle of impartiality requires them to assess older people as a specific and vulnerable group.

Guidelines and minimum standards

The most widely used are the *Sphere Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response*. These lay down the minimum standards that aid agencies should aspire to meet following emergencies. The latest edition (April 2011) specifically mentions older people as a vulnerable group, which is to be welcomed. However, there is no process of external monitoring so it is not possible to know whether or how widely this standard is actually being implemented.

The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA)

In 2002, 159 countries, including the UK, signed the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA). Among other issues, signatories to MIPAA pledged that 'in emergency situations, older persons are especially vulnerable and should be identified as such'. MIPAA is not legally binding, but it does give moral and political weight to the needs of older people.

The United Nations

The United Nations (UN) plays a unique co-ordination role in the global humanitarian system. Its co-ordination system has the potential to ensure that older people's needs are specifically met. However, in order to do this, humanitarian actors will need to make significant and lasting changes to their programmes and practices. Our research shows that the humanitarian co-ordination system focuses mainly on younger age groups and fails to prevent age discrimination. Guidance provided by the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) on humanitarian action and older people addresses this issue and should be used widely.

The UK Government

The new priorities set out by the UK Government have the potential to deliver significant change in the way that older people's needs are met in emergencies. These priorities, in particular, a focus on vulnerable groups, building the resilience of communities to minimise the impact of disasters, strengthening the linkages between humanitarian relief and longer-term development work, and a commitment to being held accountable to older people as a key stakeholder group, are all encouraging steps forward.

Without a clear commitment from the UK Government to ensure that older people's needs are recognised and acted upon by the international humanitarian community, the risk remains that older people will be pushed aside.

.....
***'I love working for the OPA.
I pray every day for HelpAge.
Because of HelpAge, older
people feel like human beings.'***

Adna, 50, Haiti, following the earthquake
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Recommendations for assisting older people in humanitarian emergencies

Recommendations for MPs

- Help constituents and the general public to understand the increase in the number of older people who are vulnerable to humanitarian emergencies, and the impact that this will have in future humanitarian emergencies.
- Encourage constituents to give generously to DEC appeals when emergencies happen.
- Advocate for the needs of older people in humanitarian emergencies through party policy processes and by raising this issue in parliament.

Recommendations for the UK Government

- Continue to use the Government's influence to ensure that older people's needs as a vulnerable group are recognised and acted upon in humanitarian responses at a UK, European and UN level.
- Ensure that data collection for DFID-funded emergency programmes in times of humanitarian crisis assesses the needs of all vulnerable groups, is disaggregated by age and sex, and includes older age groups.
- Continue to use the Government's influence to strengthen the capacity of the UN co-ordination system to respond to age as a cross-cutting issue, including the dissemination and implementation of the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee guidelines, *Humanitarian Action and Older Persons: An essential brief for humanitarian actors* (2008).
- Include older people in the analysis and planning of development programmes and in emergency preparedness programmes.

Recommendations for humanitarian actors

- Make older people visible in research, planning and implementation of humanitarian and emergency relief responses, ensuring that they are given equal recognition as a vulnerable group, and that their specific needs are met.
- Ensure that data collection in times of humanitarian crisis assesses the needs of all vulnerable groups, is disaggregated by age and sex, and includes older age groups.
- Ensure that programme staff are familiar with the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) guidelines, *Humanitarian Action and Older Persons: An essential brief for humanitarian actors* (2008).
- Make preparations for the growth in the number of older people living in countries that are vulnerable to humanitarian emergencies.

Notes

1. Based on US Census and UN figures (2011 and 2010)
2. Based on US Census and UN figures (2011 and 2010)
3. Based on US Census and UN figures (2011 and 2010)
4. Linking Population, Poverty and Development, UNFPA, 2011
5. World Disasters Report, IFRC, 2007
6. World Disasters Report, IFRC, 2007
7. Fast Facts, Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery, UNDP, 2008
8. A Study of Humanitarian Financing for Older People, HelpAge International, 2010
9. A Study of Humanitarian Financing for Older People, HelpAge International, 2010

Age UK

International work is a core pillar of the work of Age UK. We have a vision of a world in which older people flourish and a mission to improve the lives of older people, not just in the UK, but all around the world.

HelpAge International

HelpAge International helps older people to claim their rights, challenge discrimination and overcome poverty, so that they can lead dignified, secure, active and healthy lives. Our work is strengthened through our global network of like-minded organisations – the only one of its kind in the world.

Age UK and HelpAge International

Age UK and HelpAge International work together to support older people to lead more fulfilling lives in over 40 developing countries. We run long-term development and short-term emergency relief programmes.

Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC)

Age UK is a member of the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC), a network of humanitarian agencies in the UK. When a DEC appeal is declared, Age UK raises funds and awareness of the issues faced by older people during emergencies; HelpAge International implements the emergency relief programmes overseas.

Further information

For more information about the international work of Age UK, email international@ageuk.org.uk or view the international section of the Age UK website **www.ageuk.org.uk/international**

For more information about HelpAge International, email info@helpage.org or view the HelpAge International website **www.helpage.org**

For more information on the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC), email info@dec.org.uk or view the DEC website **www.dec.org.uk**

**HelpAge
International**

age helps



Tavis House
1–6 Tavistock Square
London WC1H 9NA
0800 169 80 80
www.ageuk.org.uk

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