

Building disaster resilience of older people



Key messages

- Older people are disproportionately at risk of disasters and need specific plans and actions.
- Older people are resourceful and have years of experience that can be invaluable to disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation.
- Older people have the human right to protection of lives and livelihoods.
- Older people need to be consulted and included in the post-2015 framework targets on disaster risk reduction to ensure that no one is left behind.
- Age-inclusive disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation needs to be mainstreamed within the Sustainable Development Goals targets and indicators and the new international climate change agreement.

Background

The world is changing rapidly. Unsustainable land use, biodiversity loss and global warming are leading to greater environmental and climatic risks. A report by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 2014 warned that climate change has become a threat to life and livelihoods while also being a factor in the rise of mega-disasters.¹

These changes are occurring alongside rapid population growth and population ageing. Today, people aged over 60 constitute nearly 12 per cent of the global population.² By 2030, this proportion will have reached 16 per cent – that is, 1.4 billion older people.³

This paper discusses how older people can be highly vulnerable to disasters, but also an invaluable resource to disaster risk reduction (DRR) and climate adaptation efforts. It recommends how to include older people in planning, budgeting and processes related to DRR, building resilience for all. In some cases, integrating actions is best and in others, standalone plans can be useful, depending on the context.

Disproportionate impact

Many of the countries that are facing increasing climatic disaster risk are also those that are facing the most rapid ageing of their populations. For example, Vietnam, between 2010 and 2030, will be subject to a 61 per cent increase in the number of older people; Nicaragua will experience a 54 per cent increase. Both these countries are ranked within the Dara Climate Risk monitor as being the most acutely exposed to climate change at 2030.

Extreme weather events have been shown to have a disproportionate impact on older people. When Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in 2005, 75 per cent of those who died were aged over 60, even though this age group comprised only 16 per cent of the local population.⁴ Similarly, in the Japanese tsunami of 2011, 56 per cent of those who died were 65 and over, despite this age group comprising just 23 per cent of the population.⁵

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“Demographic change means we are living in an ageing world. It is important to include older people in disaster management for both their improved protection and to make full use of their experience, skills and knowledge in support of that.”

**Margareta Wahlström,
UNISDR Head in her address
on International Day of
Disaster Risk Reduction, 2014**

1. United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2014), *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability – IPCC Working Group II Contribution to the Fifth Assessment Report*.

2. UNDESA Population Division, *Profiles of ageing 2013* puts the global proportion of over-60s at 11.7%, www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/dataset/urban/profilesOfAgeing2013.shtml (27 April 2014)

3. UNDESA Population Division, *World population prospects: the 2012 revision*, DVD edition, 2013

4. Wilson N, ‘Hurricane Katrina: unequal opportunity disaster’, *Public Policy and Aging Report* 16(2), 2006, pp 8-13.

5. HelpAge International, *Displacement and older people: the case of the Great East Japan earthquake and tsunami of 2011*, London, HelpAge International, 2013.

6. Hartog J, *Disaster resilience in an ageing world: how to make policies and programmes inclusive of older people*, London, HelpAge International, 2014

Physical decline in older age can make it harder for older people to prepare for disasters. For example, they may struggle to stockpile food and water, bring livestock to safety quickly, or travel long distances. Frail and poor older people who live alone without family or community support are more likely to live in poorly constructed houses, which can put them at greater risk. In addition, frail or housebound older people may be less able or willing to flee their homes (for example, to move to higher ground or evacuation centres when cyclones or floods threaten).

Lack of social protection and resulting old-age poverty, neglect, isolation and disability and the omission of these factors from disaster and climate planning and action can leave older people vulnerable. Older people are often not included or seen as active participants or contributors to disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation.

Missed opportunities

While older people may be disproportionately at risk, they also have significant capacities. Knowledge and experience is one of their biggest assets. For example, older people may be able to recall details about previous local disasters (and the response effort), bringing localised understanding of the risk environment and highlighting what could be improved. They can also reflect on climate variability and climate change over time, and how the community has adapted.

Experience shows that with the right kind of support, older people can contribute and use their knowledge to complement scientific and technological developments to strengthen key DRR and preparedness measures.⁶

Stockpiles in Pakistan and early warnings in the Philippines

Floods are a frequent occurrence in many parts of Pakistan. In 2012, Jacobabad district, in Sindh province, was completely submerged by flooding, which killed more than 50 people and destroyed houses and crops.

As part of a disaster risk reduction programme, HelpAge International had trained older people’s associations in the villages of Havaldar Baroi and Mud Khoso just before the floods hit, and a community mock drill was organised. Older people were equipped with stockpiled materials including digging equipment, and first aid and search and rescue items.

Just before the floods, the communities noticed that the colour of the river was changing, so they contacted the district disaster management authorities to inform them of this traditional early warning sign. The authorities confirmed that floods were to be expected, and the older people’s associations decided to mobilise the community to block the canals to their villages and divert some of the water by digging channels. Because of their actions, 50 per cent less water reached their villages when the flooding happened in comparison with previous floods.

In the Philippines, older people’s organisations have made DRR one of their key activities. They are actively involved in early warnings, reaching everyone, using SMS text, development of hazard maps with evacuation routes, and community drills with older people leading simulation activities together with the community.

Some older people’s organisations have their DRR plans included in their local government plans and the hazard maps they have developed are displayed at the local government office as a community resource.

Older people’s exclusion from DRR-related activities was highlighted in a survey for International Day for Disaster Reduction (IDDR) in 2014. In 2014, older people were the focus of IDDR, coordinated by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR). With the theme “Resilience is for Life”, the day was used to emphasise the value of acknowledging older people as a resource for disaster resilience and ensuring that they have the opportunity to take part in resilience building.

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“We have learned to look out for the signs of a disaster. We look at where a house is cracked and if the cracks are moving. If so, we know we have to evacuate and contact the other White Brigades and the police.”

Nora Aliaga, 65, leader of a “White Brigade” of older people in Bolivia who have been trained in prevention and disaster action



Steven Greenberg/Age UK

But the survey conducted jointly by UNISDR and HelpAge International demonstrates that older people are often excluded or marginalised when disaster management plans are being drawn up.⁷ Responses from 367 older people, policy makers and government officials showed that:

- 58 per cent of respondents did not know who was responsible for disaster preparedness in their communities.
- 70 per cent noted their wish to explain older people’s special needs and vulnerabilities.
- 43 per cent wanted training to help their community in disaster preparedness and response.
- 32 per cent said they wished to share their experiences of how to cope with disaster situations.

By taking some simple measures – such as including older people in early warning systems, evacuation planning and evacuation centres, stockpiling and emergency training, as well as mitigation, protection and planning activities – the impact of disasters on older people’s lives can be significantly reduced.

A UN resolution passed in December 2014 requests Member States and humanitarian organisations to take into account the specific needs and vulnerabilities of older people in disaster preparedness and needs assessments.⁸

New frameworks, new future

Addressing disaster risk is prominent in the draft Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which will guide development between 2015 and 2030. Four of the 17 proposed goals include objectives on disaster preparedness.⁹

- Goal 1 includes an objective to build the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations and reduce their exposure and vulnerability to climate-related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters.
- Goal 2 includes an objective to implement resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production, that help maintain ecosystems, that strengthen capacity for adaptation to climate change, extreme weather, drought, flooding and other disasters and that progressively improve land and soil quality.
- Goal 11 includes an objective to significantly reduce the number of deaths and the number of people affected and decrease the economic losses caused by disasters.
- Goal 13 includes an objective to strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries.

The Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai City, Japan in March 2015 will review the implementation of the 2005-2015 Hyogo Framework for Action and adopt a post-2015 framework for disaster risk reduction. This, in conjunction with the mainstreaming of disaster resilience into the SDGs, can work to reduce disaster risk. Adopting an age-inclusive approach can ensure that risk is reduced for all ages and that no one is left behind.

UN negotiations are under way to develop a new international climate change agreement that will cover all countries. The new agreement will be adopted in 2015, at the Paris climate conference, and implemented from 2020. The 2015 agreement will have to bring together the current patchwork of binding and non-binding arrangements under the UN climate convention into a single comprehensive regime.

Recommendations for policy

All three frameworks should:

- Ensure that the vulnerabilities and also the capacities and contributions of older people are responsibly addressed within the frameworks.
- Ensure that sex- and age-disaggregated data is fully mainstreamed within the monitoring and reporting frameworks.
- Integrate monitoring and reporting frameworks and ensure that ageing societies and older people are responsibly reflected in these.

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7. Survey for Older Persons in Potential Disaster Areas 2014 International Day for Disaster Risk Reduction Survey for Older Persons in Potential Disaster Areas Draft Report 20 September 2014, www.unisdr.org/2014/iddr/documents/IDDR14_DraftSurveyReport.pdf (13 November 2014)

8. *Strengthening of the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance of the United Nations*, UN General Assembly Resolution A/69/L.40, 12 December 2014

9. Open Working Group proposal for Sustainable Development Goals: Full report of the Open Working Group of the General Assembly on Sustainable Development Goals, Document A/68/970, October 2014, <http://undocs.org/A/68/970>

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HelpAge International helps older people claim their rights, challenge discrimination and overcome poverty, so that they can lead dignified, secure, active and healthy lives.

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10. Signatories to Charter 14 are asked to commit to working towards a minimum of one target as a first step and reporting on this, with the expectation that more targets will be committed to over time until all 14 are completed.

Charter 14 for governments and agencies

UNISDR and HelpAge International, in consultation with ageing and disaster management experts and a panel of older people, have drawn up a charter to guide governments and agencies in inclusive DRR.

Charter 14 sets out 14 targets based on three key principles:

- 1. In need:** Older people have specific requirements which must be understood and responded to within all DRR policy, planning and activities.
- 2. Invisible:** Older people's vulnerabilities and capacities are often overlooked due to lack of data; the collection of sex and age metrics is essential to ensure older people and other people at risk are visible and supported in DRR.
- 3. Invaluable:** Older people have years of knowledge, skills and wisdom, which are invaluable assets in DRR and must be acknowledged, valued and engaged by supporting older people to participate in DRR.

Recommendations for practice

UNISDR and HelpAge International are calling on governments to sign up to Charter 14 for Older People in Disaster Risk Reduction. This means committing to working towards the following targets:¹⁰

- Older people are specifically mentioned in national disaster management and climate policies, requiring direct action in planning, budgeting and training.
- Older people have been consulted in the development of national and local disaster and climate risk assessment and their vulnerabilities and capacities included.
- Early warning signals and information are available, accessible, understandable and actionable by older people.
- Evacuation plans at community level have specific actions to ensure older people can evacuate and are protected during these operations, including actions specific to mobility, sight, hearing and mental impairments and isolation.
- Disaster supplies and stockpiles include specialist items, medication and food required by older people and are accessible to older people in emergency distributions.
- Evacuation and rest centres are age responsive, with off-floor seating, wheelchair-accessible facilities, handrails and privacy for men and women.
- Sex-, age- and disability-disaggregated data is collected including for the following older age groups: 50-59, 60-69, 70-79, and 80+ years in all disaster management data and analysed in regard to the impact of all disaster risk reduction initiatives.
- Emergency personnel in health, search and rescue, management, coordination and protection and livelihoods have been trained in working with older people and addressing their specific needs and strengths in emergencies.
- Older people's knowledge, skills and contributions to disaster risk management are publicly acknowledged and their active involvement promoted.
- Older people have access to cash transfers and livelihood recovery initiatives following disasters.
- Resilient and climate-smart livelihood initiatives are inclusive of people who continue to work into old age.
- Older people are represented in DRR management and governance from the community to the national level to ensure that their voice is heard.
- Social protection systems such as pensions are available and can be accessed within days of a disaster and utilised as emergency cash transfer mechanisms.
- Older people have access to affordable disaster insurance and risk-transfer mechanisms.