



The Washington Group Short Set of Questions on Disability in Disaster Risk Reduction and humanitarian action: Lessons from practice

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ABSTRACT

The Washington Group Short Set of Questions on Disability (WGQ) has been promoted to support inclusive practice within Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), humanitarian action and more broadly international development. Yet there is limited documentation of learning from use in practice. This article draws together practice and learning from Indonesia, the Philippines and Bangladesh by German Non-Government Organisation Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund (ASB), and local partner Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs). It aims to break down perceptions related to the complexity of disability inclusion and disability data, and encourage disaster actors to actively use the WGQ. It outlines that the WGQ are a practical tool for DRR and humanitarian action actors to support identification of persons with disabilities and plan accessible initiatives and services which are inclusive to most at-risks populations. However, the article argues that it is important to ensure those using the WGQ are sufficiently trained and supported, the question set is fitting to needs, appropriately framed and implemented, and additional information is collected based on data collection needs to ensure there is sufficient information to support inclusive practice within initiatives. In addition, this paper contributes to the literature on inclusion by spelling out the learning that has come in the journey to develop good practice in collecting and using disability data in DRR and humanitarian actions.

1. Introduction

The recognition and importance of integration of disability inclusion within the disaster sector is relatively new [1–3]. Evidence has shown that persons with disabilities are at disproportionate risk in disasters [3–6]. The 2013 UNISDR global survey “Living with Disability and Disasters” found that 86% of persons with disabilities respondents were excluded from DRR management, planning and decision-making at all levels [7]. It is only with the 2015 Sendai Framework for DRR (SFDRR) and the 2016 *Charter on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action*, that recognition and commitments to disability inclusion within DRR and humanitarian action have been globally made [3,8,9]. There is now increasing momentum towards rectifying disability inclusion gaps and greater prominence to collecting improved disability data [2]. Yet even with this growing understanding and commitment there is limited understanding by DRR and humanitarian actors on how initiatives can be inclusive of persons with disabilities including implementation of the disability phrase “nothing about us, without us”¹ [1,3,10,11]. Most stakeholders are at an early learning

stage in implementing disability inclusion, with minimal definitive evidence available about effective strategies, appropriate tools and the connection between data and increased inclusion [12]. Perry [2] also identifies that ‘many of the existing tools and quality and accountability standards used in humanitarian action do not feature disability prominently’. Research has shown that barriers for take up of inclusion in DRR by DRR actors is limited experience and expertise, disability inclusion perceived as a technical issue, and the perceived lack of technical expertise in disability stops actors from working with and for persons with disabilities [1]. This article aims to break down these perceptions, add to evidence and practice around disability inclusion and disability data in DRR and humanitarian action and encourage disaster actors to actively use the WGQ.

Disability inclusive advocates argue that accurate disability data is ‘a first step towards inclusion’ [12,13]. Disability data supports better understanding of who and where persons with disabilities are, risks that people may face and how people can better be supported and appropriately accommodated to ensure inclusion [14]. Albuero-Canete [15:21] argues ‘low prioritization of data collection on disability not

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¹ The phrase “nothing about us, without us” promotes self-representation of persons with disabilities in all components of disability inclusion and decision making (Charlton 1998).

only contribute to the low awareness regarding persons with disabilities, but it also contributes to their further marginalization and invisibility in development programming. In terms of DRR, disability data is extremely important in terms of assessing community risks, access to information, infrastructure, and services, and (understanding) capacities to address identified risks.' Systematic disability data collection prior to and during a crisis helps actors implement inclusive preparedness and response and address specific challenges experienced by persons with disabilities before, during and after emergencies [16].

There is more than one approach to collecting reliable disability data [8]. The 2011 World Report on Disability recommends countries adopt and apply the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) [17]. Yet as Robinson [3] points out the ICF, a 303-page survey, is daunting for non-specialists. He argues that the Washington Group Short Set of Questions on Disability (WGQ) are a more practical option. The WGQ are now been promoted as the go to question set for disability data collection within the disaster sector and international development by most disability stakeholders [3,13,14,18–20,22]. It is argued that the WGQ enable a more efficient and standardised way to identify persons with disabilities within disaster and development contexts and collect data that can support understanding of prevalence rates, risks people face, participation and give insight on needs to support inclusion without needing specialised disability technical skills [14]. Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund (ASB)² [2] have been actively promoting the use of the WGQ in the disaster sector internationally, but has learnt that by itself the WGQ lack practice strength. Over time ASB has analysed evidence of using the WGQ from its own and civil society and Disability Inclusive DRR Network (DIDRRN) partners' practice, including both DRR focused Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs). From this ASB and partners have strengthened their approaches to using and promoting the WGQ in DRR and humanitarian action, including linking them to the ASB developed Information-Action (IA) model and the 5 Key Inclusion Musts [1,14,22].

This article explores the benefits and challenges in using the WGQ in DRR and humanitarian action and documents learning and good practice for practitioners, that should also be useful beyond the disaster sector. It argues that the WGQ are an important tool for disaster actors as part of integrating disability inclusion into disaster work, particularly if combined with the ASB IA Model. However, it is important to assess if it is the best tool to be used in a given circumstance. That users must be sufficiently trained and supported. The WGQ is fitting to needs, appropriately framed and implemented, and additional information is collected to ensure there is sufficient information to support inclusive practice within initiatives. In addition, this paper contributes to the literature on inclusion by spelling out the learning that has come in the journey to develop good practice in collecting and using disability data in DRR and humanitarian actions.

2. Methodology

Research for this paper was undertaken by staff members of ASB between 2016 and 18. Data was collected and analysed from a number of sources:

- Desk review of documents,
- ASB and partner;

project and assessment reports,

- o Project stories of change,
- o Evaluations,

² A German relief and social-welfare organisation, engaged in social service provision in Germany and abroad.

- o Reflection workshops,
- o Direct observation and practice in the field, and

– Interviews and focus group discussion with ASB and partner civils society organisations and network staff, and members of project and affected communities.³

This research covered DRR & humanitarian action organisations, projects and practice in Indonesia, the Philippines and Bangladesh. Permission was granted for this information to be used by representatives of all organisations mentioned in the article.

2.1. Changing understanding of disability

Understanding of disability has changed over time. In the past there was a greater focus on disability as seen from charity and medical models, where persons with disabilities need to be helped (charity) and their disability is a medical issue that needs to be cured (medical). In more recent years there has been a move to social and rights-based models that focus on the relationship between an individual and their environment, including environmental factors that exclude or disable persons with disabilities, including inherent structural, legal, social and economic barriers [11,23–25]. These models view the person first, and recognise capacity, right to participation and social responsibility for inclusion for all [23]. A part of the shift there is now a greater emphasis on looking at functioning versus impairments.

The ICF defines functioning as “*an umbrella term for body functions, body structures, activities and participation. It denotes the positive aspects of the interaction between an individual (with a health condition) and that individual's contextual factors (environmental and personal factors).*” [26:212]

The WGQ, in line with the social and rights-based model, focuses on assessing functioning, specifically what a person is able to do in the environment in which they live.

3. What are the WGQ?

In 2001, the Washington Group, an informal UN expert group in disability statistics and measurement, saw the importance of a clear link between the purpose of measurement and the operationalisation of indicators of disability. The Washington Group agreed on the selection of equalisation of opportunities as the purpose for the development of an internationally comparable general disability measure. This purpose was chosen because it was relevant and feasible across countries, with respect to policy and capacity, to integrate non-technical questions on disability in regular censuses [26]. The Washington Group developed a question set to gather information about functioning limitations in basic daily activity (such as walking, seeing, hearing and remembering) among populations in national censuses. This allows identification of persons with similar types and levels of limitations related to basic activity functioning regardless of nationality or culture. The questions are socially and culturally bias-free allowing provision of comparable data globally. The WGQ short question set of 6 questions are easily included in any survey. The WGQ, unlike other disability measures, do not require disability or technical expertise and can be used by anyone. Furthermore, the non-technical nature of the WGQ minimises assumptions about the situation of person with disabilities, reducing the risk of inaccuracies and misguided data [26]

The WGQ are:

1. Do you have difficulty seeing, even if wearing glasses?

³ Partners included funded partner relationships where ASB acted as the donor and network partners from the Disability Inclusive DRR Network (DIDRRN).

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