

# Unseen challenges: risks faced by IDPs with disabilities in Ukraine

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**IDPs with disabilities in Ukraine face heightened risks. More initiatives are needed that prioritise disability-inclusive approaches, employ data-driven decision-making, and actively involve people with disabilities in response efforts.**

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has resulted in a severe and rapidly evolving displacement crisis, endangering the lives, dignity and well-being of millions of displaced individuals. People with disabilities are particularly exposed to these heightened risks.

By the end of 2022, the number of internally displaced people (IDPs) in Ukraine reached 5,900,000. Significantly, a quarter of IDPs say they have at least one family member with a disability accompanying them, while 41%

indicate the presence of one or more elderly household members.<sup>1</sup> National and international organisations have made efforts to improve the assistance provided to people with disabilities. However, individuals with disabilities continue to encounter significant barriers when attempting to access bomb shelters and have become stranded in conflict zones because of financial limitations, lack of accessible transportation or absence of assistive devices. Even those who have

successfully fled the conflict continue to experience difficulties regarding hygiene, mobility equipment, and accessible housing.

The COVID-19 pandemic had already exacerbated existing patterns of discrimination, exclusion and inequality faced by people with disabilities, especially those living in institutions. In the first quarter of 2021, 67% of IDPs aged 60 and above, as well as 69% of people with disabilities reported dire economic situations and exhibited coping mechanisms for food insecurity.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the digital verification system for pensioners in non-government-controlled areas was difficult to access for people with disabilities and older people residing in these areas, many of whom were internally displaced.

### Challenges in evacuation and accessing support

In August 2022, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) held a meeting to address the increased risk of death or injury faced by individuals with disabilities during attacks on civilians. The discussion shed light on several obstacles, including a lack of access to evacuation support, separation from family, inadequate information on available aid, inaccessible bomb shelters, and the absence of alternatives to sirens for those with hearing impairments.<sup>3</sup> A survey in mid-2022 by the National Assembly of People with Disabilities in Ukraine corroborated the CRPD's findings and showed that evacuees with disabilities also faced challenges in obtaining assistive devices in their new communities.

The limited involvement of individuals with disabilities and organisations of people with disabilities (OPDs) in emergency preparedness and response planning further exacerbates the situation. The impact of this exclusion is reflected in the low proportion of IDPs with disabilities successfully assisted by protection responses. As of April 2023, of the 1,581,398 people reached by the protection cluster, 3% (42,000) were people with disabilities and 11% (176,000) were elderly.<sup>4</sup> Given that the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) found that 25% of displaced households contain at least one member with

a disability, it is probable that the protection requirements of IDPs with disabilities are not being fully met. Recent research by the Protection Cluster underscores the persistence of three key protection issues faced by people with disabilities: inadequate access to specialised services, limited independence in accessing livelihoods and financial resources, and insufficient provision of safe spaces and privacy.

### IDPs with disabilities in institutions

The challenges faced by IDPs with disabilities are further exacerbated when they reside in institutions. The poor living conditions and standards of care found in Ukraine's residential care system have long been a subject of controversy, particularly concerning orphaned and abandoned children. Many institutions lack suitable evacuation plans and routes, and the conflict has further intensified existing protection issues, including neglect, physical and sexual violence, and exploitation of vulnerable residents.<sup>5</sup> The Ukrainian government had brought in some reforms, but these have been derailed by the outbreak of war, leaving IDPs with disabilities – especially children – who live in institutions doubly abandoned because of their displacement and their disabilities.

### Lack of data

The lack of reliable, detailed data on IDPs with disabilities is one of the major barriers impeding their integration into policies and programmes. Collecting and utilising comprehensive national-level data is a complex undertaking but essential if governments are to mitigate the hazards that displacement may bring to IDPs with disabilities. It is equally important to consider how to derive meaningful insights from the data and adjust programming accordingly. Additionally, qualitative research plays a crucial role in identifying specific obstacles and shortcomings faced by IDPs with disabilities, providing valuable insights that can inform targeted interventions.

With the outbreak of war in February 2022, the IOM has conducted several rounds of representative general population surveys



Natalia and her son, displaced by war in Sloviansk, eastern Ukraine, found shelter in Lviv. At Lviv National University of Veterinary Medicine and Biotechnologies, they join 120 others in communal dormitories, June 2022. Credit: Christian Jepsen/NRC

to identify the needs, movements and intentions of affected individuals, including IDPs with disabilities. However, the exact number of IDPs with disabilities living in territories affected by war or occupation remains unclear due to various factors. One key reason is the lack of synchronisation in the IDP registration system at the county level, leading to inconsistent and incomplete data. Moreover, humanitarian organisations do not consistently report on indicators related to disabilities, further contributing to the lack of comprehensive data on this population.

Improved coordination among relevant stakeholders, enhanced data collection mechanisms, and standardised reporting practices would contribute to a more accurate understanding of the situation faced by IDPs with disabilities, enabling more effective and inclusive responses.

### Promising practices and implications

The European Disability Forum (EDF) and Christian Blind Mission (CBM) have collaborated with OPDs in Ukraine and neighbouring countries to provide direct services and referrals to over 11,800 individuals and their families. This joint project has focused on meeting immediate needs and influencing the broader humanitarian response, with future

efforts aimed at promoting disability-inclusive recovery.

The Riga Declaration is another notable initiative with positive implications for disability-inclusive responses in displacement crises. Drafted by EDF and SUSTENTO, it highlights the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in Ukraine and those fleeing the war.<sup>6</sup> The declaration emphasises the importance of accessibility, deinstitutionalisation, and meaningful participation for people with disabilities. It calls for comprehensive data collection, transparent emergency response plans, the active involvement of people with disabilities and OPDs in decision-making processes, and independent monitoring with the close involvement of OPDs.

ACTED, with support from Alliance2015, has helped renovate 120 collective centres to provide dignified and accessible accommodation for those affected by the conflict.<sup>7</sup> Completed in January 2023, 7 rooms of a 24-hour shelter for young people with disabilities in Chernivtsi now offer improved living conditions – including recreations rooms and facilities tailored to individuals with disabilities, limited mobility, and the elderly – allowing displaced Ukrainians, including those with disabilities, to regain independence and experience greater comfort.

Sustaining and expanding such initiatives is crucial to ensure the full recognition and fulfilment of the rights and needs of IDPs with disabilities. By persistently prioritising disability-inclusive approaches, employing data-driven decision-making, and actively involving people with disabilities and OPDs in the response efforts, a more inclusive and resilient humanitarian system can be fostered, leaving no one behind.

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