

# Education access for all

Helen Pinnock and Marian Hodgkin

**Despite the challenges and barriers experienced by displaced learners with disabilities and the evident need for further human and financial resources, inclusive education in crisis contexts is possible.**

According to the International Disability and Development Consortium, at times of emergency and displacement children with disabilities are exposed to greater risk of being separated from their families or being unable to escape from danger, find their way to safety or identify their families. Furthermore, children and young people who previously had access to support services and may have used assistive devices or mobility aids may lose these during displacement, further reducing their previous level of functioning and independence.

Education can play a protective role in emergencies, providing key life-saving messages and a safe space for children and young people to gather and receive care and support from responsible adults.

The need to provide inclusive services at the outset – and guidance to do so – has been recognised. Through a process of consensus over what the guidance should be, the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies' (INEE) handbook, *Minimum Standards for Education: Preparedness, Relief, Recovery*<sup>2</sup>, provides guidance on holistic education in crisis and post-crisis contexts and a common framework for design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation as well as for advocacy and policy formulation. The INEE Minimum Standards is an official companion to the Sphere Project's Minimum Standards in Disaster Response handbook<sup>3</sup>, and has recently been updated; inclusion is now a key issue that is mainstreamed throughout the INEE handbook.

While it is important to have clear legal and normative standards to hold governments and humanitarian agencies to account, steps need to be taken to make them a reality. One of the barriers to making progress on protecting and including people

with disabilities in emergency response is the fear that inclusion is 'too difficult' in a crisis – and thus no action is taken. It is important to make clear that committing to inclusion is not about demanding the impossible or reaching for unrealistic goals but rather about allowing the principles of inclusion to inform all work, asking who is currently excluded from learning and participation and what all of us can do to improve the situation.

## Challenging attitudes and breaking barriers

When examining the challenges to ensuring that people with disabilities have access to education in crisis, it is important to consider attitudinal and environmental barriers as well as demand and supply.

When communities are displaced, school facilities may be less accessible and the journey to school may take longer and be more dangerous or simply less familiar, meaning that children with disabilities are likely to stay at home. Often when schools are damaged or just not well maintained, children or young people with disabilities are disproportionately affected, as access to classrooms may be difficult, appropriate seating may not be available or sanitary facilities may not be accessible, which can be particularly problematic for girls. Furthermore, teachers may be unwilling to accept disabled children in the classroom if they are considered a burden, disruptive or unable to learn. Some teachers assume that they need special training to support disabled children.

Where families are unable to pay school fees or buy the necessary supplies, they may give priority to children without disabilities. Some children with disabilities are more likely to be kept at home, possibly even hidden from outsiders, and therefore are unlikely

*"I have now realised all children are the same and need to be appreciated. My encouragement to parents who have disabled children like mine is to appeal to them not to hold them in solitary confinement but instead to embrace reality and strive to give them the best in life."*

(Father of Ranya, a six-year-old who has been attending a school for two years in an IDP camp in Sudan)<sup>1</sup>

to attend school. And families may feel that their children with disabilities will not be able to succeed in a conventional school.

Contexts vary hugely and humanitarian actors should work hard to avoid assumptions. For example, case studies collected among disabled people displaced by conflict in Mozambique found that there was strong community support for inclusion throughout the crisis. Many families in flight carried disabled people with them over long distances, despite experiencing greater risk and hardship as a result.

Humanitarian needs assessments should always ask any stakeholders simple questions focused on inclusion, such as: "Who was most excluded from education before the emergency?", "Who is most likely to be most excluded now, and why?" and "What are the best estimates of the numbers of the people thus affected?" Assessors should always ask specific questions about the situation of disabled people and, if it is possible, talk to people with disabilities and disabled people's organisations.

Those working on planning and budgeting should recognise that there will be a number of disabled (and otherwise excluded) people who will need certain barriers to be removed if they are to participate in services. If budgets need to be set before the most marginalised people's needs have been confirmed, a flexible 'inclusion' budget line should be built in. At the very least, estimates that around 10% of the

target population are likely to have had a disability before the crisis should be used to cost support for disabled people's access to services.

After the initial assessment, emergency interventions should factor in sufficient time to secure more precise information on issues facing excluded people, and then develop appropriate interventions.

In Pakistan in 2005, after widespread displacement caused by the Kashmir earthquake, Save the Children Sweden established community education councils linked to rehabilitated schools. Each school council included at least two children, who were asked to report who was not in school and why they thought these children were absent. The school councils found that often girls and children with disabilities were kept at home because their families thought that going to school was not safe or that these children would not benefit from education. Communities were worried about unfamiliar routes to school, often through unsafe territory. Parents of disabled children feared their children might receive serious injury or get lost. Without open-minded investigation, such reluctance to send disabled children to school could have been interpreted as traditional resistance to inclusion, rather than stemming from practical concerns. Once the children had been identified, the community education council developed plans to make it easier for them to come to school and to have a positive experience once there.<sup>4</sup>

When barriers to inclusion for children and young people with disabilities have been identified, education practitioners can work with communities and local governments to exploit opportunities presented by the emergency to encourage change to exclusionary practices and attitudes:

- When developing a back-to-school campaign with the local community, emphasise that every child has the same rights to education and that sending all children to school is appropriate and safe.
- Arrange rotas of adults to escort children to school,

in particular assisting those with limited mobility.

- Work with disabled people's organisations and parents to identify reasons why families are resisting education for their children – and engage them to work with teachers on issues of discrimination, or even assist in classrooms where appropriate.
- When (re)building school facilities, consider how to introduce more inclusive buildings with ramps, increased natural lighting and flow of air, and white walls to help children see better.
- Incorporate inclusive education messages in teacher training (which will often be planned as part of an emergency education response) and advise teachers and volunteers how to manage diverse classes through seating arrangements, buddy systems or the development of low-cost inclusive teaching and learning materials.<sup>5</sup>
- Highlight the inclusive things that teachers, the education programme and/or the community are already doing in order to foster the desire for improvement.

In contexts of displacement the learning environment is usually not ideal for anyone, regardless of whether or not they are disabled. Investing effort in improving the accessibility of classrooms, ensuring safety to and from school and providing teachers with inclusive teaching techniques and support is likely to improve the provision of education for every learner, create a more pleasant environment to teach in, and result in more participatory and inclusive communities.

### Conclusion and recommendations

Education in emergencies is still a relatively new humanitarian sector, and structures, capacities and tools are still being developed. There are thus opportunities to find ways of working to ensure that those who are currently excluded are sought out and included in emergency response:

- Demystify the idea of inclusive education for those working in emergencies, and empower all teachers, staff, officials and

volunteers with the awareness that working for inclusive education is something that everyone can contribute to.

- Make inclusive assessments, programme design, monitoring and evaluation standard practice, challenging the invisibility of disabled or other excluded and marginalised children and young people.
- Encourage donors to provide dedicated funding lines for work with the most excluded, recognising that costs per beneficiary may be higher.
- Require agencies to report on inclusion – both positive and negative aspects. INEE's experience is that inclusive education efforts are often documented but agencies are often understandably reluctant to record whom they fail to reach. Identifying and acknowledging shortcomings helps others to learn and is an important step to giving excluded people the visibility they need if they are to ever experience inclusion.

INEE's Inclusive Education and Disability Task Team includes representatives from a range of UN agencies, international and national NGOs and academics. The Team supports the INEE membership and the work of the Education Cluster in improving the information management systems, capacity building and technical guidance available to those working to provide education for learners with disabilities affected by displacement and crisis. To find out more, or to join, please email the authors.

Helen Pinnock ([h.pinnock@savethechildren.org.uk](mailto:h.pinnock@savethechildren.org.uk)) is an education advisor at Save the Children UK and convenes INEE's Inclusive Education and Disability Task Team. Marian Hodgkin ([marian@ineesite.org](mailto:marian@ineesite.org)) is INEE's Coordinator for Network Services (<http://www.ineesite.org/inclusion/>).

1. Quote provided by World Vision in INEE *Pocket Guide to Inclusive Education* 2009, available at <http://www.ineesite.org/inclusion>

2. <http://tinyurl.com/INEE-Standards>

3. <http://www.sphereproject.org>

4. Case Study from the INEE *Pocket Guide to Inclusive Education* 2009, p14.

5. Look out for forthcoming INEE *Pocket Guide to Supporting Learning for People with Disabilities*.