

Perception and protection in Sri Lanka

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An assessment conducted in Sri Lanka in 2008 revealed that displaced people with disabilities were extremely vulnerable to protection incidents and their vulnerability was increased by their lack of voice.

Undoubtedly, the context of Sri Lanka is a complex one. The country has suffered from sporadic civil war since 1983, and in 2008, at the time when the assessment was conducted, Sri Lanka had entered a new period of open conflict, after the abrogation of the ceasefire in early January of that year.

The field assessment revealed a number of connections between conflict, displacement and disability. One of the most evident was that conflict and displacement are a cause of permanent physical disability either directly as a result of injuries or because the situation of conflict and resulting displacement had not allowed people with injuries to access health services and be treated – therefore injuries that might have been cured had become the cause of a permanent disability.

The field assessment further highlighted the existence of two different types of protection challenges confronting people with disabilities: protection challenges that are specific to persons with disabilities in situation of conflict and displacement, and protection concerns that confront the general population but to which people with disabilities might be more vulnerable because of their lack of voice within their family and community.

Specific challenges

It is usually much more difficult for people with disabilities to leave when conflict erupts; often they have to find alternative ways of escaping or they do not escape at all. A young woman with four children, three of whom were affected by severe disability, explained that her family was unable to leave their village, even though the shelling was very close to her house, because they

did not have the means to carry the three disabled children. While the rest of the villagers fled, this family remained behind, dug a hole in the ground and hid there for days.

Another man, a wheelchair-user, recounted that when the conflict was approaching his village, his family took the decision to split up and to arrange for his earlier departure as they worried about his inability to leave in an emergency. The man had to leave his wife and young teenage daughters without any male support in an area visited regularly by fighters, increasing their potential exposure to sexual and gender-based violence and forced recruitment.

Another issue that was raised by a number of persons with disabilities was the identification by the security forces of young injured or disabled Tamil men and women as ex-combatants. Young amputee men and women would regularly be stopped and interrogated at checkpoints as their disability singled them out as potentially having been involved with the rebel movement. Many of the young men and women who were experiencing these increased security controls were consequently not accessing health services for fear of being interrogated and arrested on the way.

In other instances people with hearing or speech impairments were harassed and arrested at checkpoints because of their inability to express themselves and answer questions posed by the security forces. Their disability was not immediately recognised by the security forces who considered it rather as ‘suspicious behaviour’.

Other interviewees with disabilities talked of difficulties encountered

during their displacement. Because of cultural and religious beliefs about disability, some people with disabilities did not benefit from the solidarity of the host population and were unable to secure a shelter with host families. Moreover, even though organisations working on disability continue to advocate strongly for accessible IDP and refugee camps – and provide technical guidance to design and organise these settings, including, for example, accessibility of water points, distribution points, toilets, community areas, education areas and shelters – it is rare to find camps where the needs of people with disabilities are taken into account.

Accessibility does not only cover physical access. Access to information is also extremely important as it is the key to obtaining services and protection. Information in camp settings is generally given through traditional methods, such as announcements and signboards that do not reach visually or hearing impaired people, condemning them to exclusion and marginalisation.

Furthermore, there was often no consideration of the difficulties that people with disabilities might encounter in return and resettlement plans both during the travel back to their place of origin and in terms of rebuilding their lives.

Additional vulnerability

Because of their lack of voice and the family's and community's underlying acceptance that they are 'second-class human beings', persons with disabilities were more vulnerable than others to the type of protection problem not specifically linked to disability but that might affect the general population. The most affected were women, children and elderly persons, indicating that disability can multiply the vulnerability of those who already hold an inferior position in the family's and community's power dynamics.

It was also noted that, within the disability sphere, persons with mental disability were found to be extremely vulnerable, particularly to sexual and gender-based violence against women with mental disability and neglect of children with mental disability potentially leading to their death

People with disability were discriminated against within the family to the point of being physically hidden in the house and never let outside and they were often not mentioned in the official family documents. This was reported specifically as an issue for high-class families, indicating how protection concerns are not necessarily linked to poor economic conditions.

Very few offices of UN organisations and NGOs were physically accessible to persons with disabilities and the arrangements for meetings and events did not take into consideration the special needs of persons with disabilities, unless made by organisations working specifically in this field and who campaign to include people with disabilities in all activities.

Moreover, it was noted that when there was a person with a disability in the family there was often a disruption of the family structure and 'coping mechanism' - usually with negative effects on the security and wellbeing of the family. In some cases, children whose parents had become disabled had to drop out of school to work and provide for the family. Women whose sons or daughters were disabled could not work because they needed to take care of them, further adding to their vulnerability.

Interestingly, the findings strongly diverged from the perception on disability and displacement shared by many professionals consulted during the assessment. People with disabilities were generally viewed as 'different' from the other recognised vulnerable groups – women, children and the elderly – and disability was considered a specific subject requiring an 'expertise'. Furthermore, there was a general acknowledgment that, because of their limited numbers, displaced persons with disabilities were not a priority. In the end, all these arguments were used to justify the lack of knowledge and the consequent inaction on the subject.

This field assessment to identify vulnerabilities of people with disabilities to protection challenges in a context of conflict and displacement was one of the first of its kind and was limited in time and scope¹ but gives initial indications that

confirm the vulnerability of people with disabilities and highlight the need to fill the knowledge and intervention gap into which people with disabilities are falling.

Conclusions

Among the most pressing actions, governments and the international community, particularly organisations working on protection, should:

- develop the knowledge and capacity of governmental authorities and humanitarian and development organisations to identify protection issues affecting people with disabilities in situations of conflict and displacement, through assessments and sharing of information
- continue advocacy to ensure the inclusion of people with disabilities in humanitarian and development organisations' and governments' mandates and programmes
- continue advocacy to ensure that the 'charity' approach commonly used when addressing people with disabilities' concerns is substituted with the rights-based approach
- work together with disabled people's organisations as the best placed actors to raise awareness about people with disabilities' concerns and priorities
- ensure better representation of people with disabilities inside humanitarian and development organisations and local authorities as this will naturally increase these actors' awareness on the issue.

As one Sri Lankan colleague pointed out: "people with disabilities are vulnerable because they are hidden"; it is our responsibility to ensure that they are seen and their voices are heard.

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1. 60 persons with disabilities were interviewed in the North and East of Sri Lanka over a period of four months.