A shared vision

Shuaib Chalklen

I assumed my position as the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Disability at a time when we have an enormous opportunity to bring about sustainable change in the conditions of all persons with disabilities, with particular attention to Africa and other developing regions of the world.

We are in the fortunate position of having 77 countries that have ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and a great many countries that have used the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (adopted in 1993) as a tool to develop national policies, although the implementation of these policies remains a challenge. A growing number of governments, legislators and members of civil society beyond the disability community have begun to work with organisations of persons with disabilities, building broader constituency for advocating for the rights of persons with disabilities in society and development around the world.

While much progress has been made through the adoption of the Convention and increased efforts in promoting the disability-inclusive Millennium Development Goals, persons with disabilities – at least 10% of the world’s population – still remain among the poorest of the world’s citizens. And the current competing political, social and economic concerns make the needs of persons with disabilities all the more pressing.

There is also the matter of persons with disabilities in situations of conflict and displacement, and in other situations of great risk. The devastating and tragic earthquake in Haiti brings to mind the situation of persons with disabilities within the present circumstances and their urgent need for food and shelter.

The previous Special Rapporteurs, Mr Bengt Lindqvist and Sheikha Hissa Al-Thani, noted that there was a lack of implementation of disability policies in countries around the world. I plan to focus on the blockages to the implementation of disability-specific programmes and policies. One of the means of encouraging the implementation of disability programmes and policies is through the sharing of information and technical cooperation.

My vision is for equal opportunities and the full participation of persons with disabilities in society and development, informed by international cooperation. I intend to bring together the disability community, governments, the United Nations system and civil society to promote this vision in practical action for a real change for persons with disabilities on the ground.

This issue of Forced Migration Review is a most welcome contribution to the work of bringing together our different communities, sharing information, encouraging cooperation and promoting this vision.

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Disability in displacement

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People with disabilities face many additional difficulties before, during and after displacement but provision of appropriate assistance and protection for all is feasible.

Invisible at the best of times, persons with disabilities are among the most neglected during flight, displacement and return. Due to communication or physical barriers, negative attitudes or other obstacles, persons with disabilities face many hurdles in accessing assistance and protection. They may also face a heightened level of disability during displacement, because of changes in their environment or lack of appropriate care and services. Moreover, they are often seen as passive recipients of aid rather than active participants with ideas, skills and expertise to share. It is not unusual to hear aid providers express views along the lines of: “How can we pay particular attention to persons with disabilities in situations of displacement? We already have so many things to think about when delivering aid and we don’t have the expertise to deal with disability. Besides, there aren’t that many persons with disabilities among displaced populations. In any case, our programmes do not discriminate – everyone can access them.”

According to estimates by the World Health Organisation, persons with disabilities account for 7-10% of the world’s population. One can extrapolate, therefore, that there are 2.9-4.2 million persons with disabilities among the world’s 42 million displaced, thereby debunking the myth that there are few among displaced populations. In contexts where many injuries are likely to have occurred – in conflict, earthquakes, etc – this number could be much higher as temporary or new permanent disability affects many people with injuries. In failing to take account of these persons with specific needs, humanitarian actors – mainstream and specialised