

Negotiating inclusion in Sri Lanka

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In providing assistance to displaced people with disabilities in Sri Lanka, partnerships and negotiating skills have proved essential.

During the final month of intense conflict in Sri Lanka in 2009, over 230,000 people were reportedly forced to flee their homes because of the fighting. These new IDPs joined 65,000 other IDPs who had previously escaped from the northern conflict area between the end of 2008 and mid April 2009. With such a huge influx of newly displaced people the temporary camps were overwhelmed.

In such a situation of displacement, as in any humanitarian situation, people with disabilities and their families have the same basic needs as any other person but, because of invisibility, inaccessibility and marginalisation, they often slip through the cracks and are not part of the mainstream response. Additionally, people with disabilities may have other specific needs.

It became clear to CBM, an international NGO supporting long-term partners working with people with disabilities in northern Sri Lanka, that people living with disabilities who were caught up in the displacement urgently needed assistance. CBM started up a partnership with LEADS, a local NGO who, in line with their mission to care for the most neglected people, included these families specifically in their emergency response.

LEADS, because of their long-standing relationship with the Government of Sri Lanka, was in a position to provide assistance to the IDPs in the camps, including to the large number of displaced families with disabled family members. Up till then, LEADS had not specifically included persons with disabilities in any of their work. CBM on the other hand has been working for more than 100 years in the field of disability, supporting partners through providing strategic, technical or financial support. Together the two agencies were able to bring the relevant mix of skills, knowledge and capacity to the situation.

The LEADS/CBM project aimed to provide for the basic humanitarian needs of people living with disabilities and their families: suitable emergency shelter and facilities, sanitation units, meals, community cooking facilities and a common hall. LEADS managed the entire project on the ground, using their local staff. CBM provided training on inclusion of persons with disabilities, technical and strategic support, and financial support.

Towards inclusion

Emergency responses usually involve following minimum standards, with common shelter design based on existing guidelines such as Sphere and on local contexts. Unfortunately, most of these guidelines are not inclusive and do not take into consideration the needs of persons with disabilities. LEADS faced major obstacles in building accessible settlements as the cluster shelter had defined minimum dimensions for shelter construction and requested LEADS to adhere to these – but these specifications did not take accessibility features into consideration. Since LEADS were building accommodation for persons with disabilities they needed to exceed the minimum standards for size.

The primary reason put forward as an argument against exceeding minimum standards was on the grounds of maintaining equity and uniformity in the shelters being provided, and avoiding non-conformity which might give rise to conflict. In comparison with existing shelters categorised as temporary and 'emergency-type', these proposed designs were viewed as being of a semi-permanent nature. However, in the end it was agreed that a positive bias would not compromise equity as those with disability required some 'compensation' to help them cope with their difficulties in living conditions. Furthermore, given the generally accepted preferential manner of treatment of people with disabilities in Sri Lanka, it was not seen as a major threat to harmony. Ultimately, through advocacy efforts with local government,

LEADS received permission to build appropriate accommodation, although they did need to compromise somewhat on the size of the shelter.¹

The whole process of seeking to stay accountable to the coordination mechanism before building caused huge delays and placed at risk LEADS' organisational credibility in the eyes of supporting partners and authorities. Relationships were somewhat soured between local staff and cluster members. The perception of LEADS as an organisation was also affected by criticisms of reluctance in coordination being levelled at them. LEADS also found itself sandwiched between the government's wishes and maintaining coordination within the cluster.

The fact that LEADS faced these obstacles shows perhaps the lack of awareness and agreed consensus in implementation amongst humanitarian stakeholders about the presence, rights and needs of people with disabilities. There are people with disabilities in all target groups and their needs and rights are presently being ignored by mainstream humanitarian actors who need sensitisation and training in this. Standards and guidelines for Disaster Risk Reduction and humanitarian action at the international and national levels should include standards concerning the rights of persons with disabilities – and CBM continues to advocate at the international level for the Sphere standards to pay adequate attention to persons with disabilities using its partner experiences in implementing inclusive emergency responses such as in Sri Lanka. Meanwhile, LEADS is now working to resettle these displaced families and restore their livelihoods. The recently constructed shelters will soon be used as rehabilitation sites.

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1. reduced to 13'x12' from the original 17'x12' but still maintaining accessibility features; average standard temporary shelter would have been about 10'x13'.