

If not now, when?

Keeping promises to older people affected by humanitarian crises

The numbers of older people affected by humanitarian crises are large and growing rapidly. The proportion of the population aged 50 and over in fragile countries, where conflict and disasters are more likely to occur, is expected to rise from 12.3 per cent (219.9 million) in 2020 to 19.2 per cent (586.3 million) in 2050. From earthquakes, hurricanes and flooding to violent conflict and health emergencies, evidence shows that older people are at particularly high risk in emergencies.

In 2020

12.3% 

of the population living in fragile countries are aged 50 and over

By 2050

19.2% 

of the population living in fragile countries will be aged 50 and over

This report looks at the extent to which older people's rights are being upheld in emergencies and their needs met. The picture it paints is a bleak one. Although some efforts are being made to support older people, overall, the humanitarian system is failing by the standards it has set itself.

The report draws on the findings of needs assessments carried out by HelpAge International in the 13 months to the end of 2019. In total, we interviewed 8,883 people aged 50 to 80-plus affected by natural disasters, conflict or socioeconomic crises in 11 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East.

Since the data was collected, COVID-19 has swept across the globe. The pandemic has both increased the need for humanitarian aid and disrupted its delivery. The response to coronavirus has thrown into stark relief the gulf between the risks older people are facing and the level of support available to them. The findings in this report provide important lessons for improving this response.

Promises, promises


At the heart of humanitarian action are four principles: humanity, neutrality, impartiality and operational independence. A number of international commitments


have been made in recent years to protect the right of older people to safe and dignified access to humanitarian assistance in keeping with these principles and provisions set out in international law that protect human rights, even in emergencies.

At the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, global leaders made a series of commitments towards a more inclusive humanitarian system. In 2020, the UN Secretary-General issued a policy brief calling for older people to be integrated into the overall humanitarian responses to COVID-19. Technical guidance has also been published to support humanitarian agencies to include older people in the response.


At breaking point


The findings of our assessments make clear that older people's basic needs are often unmet:

20% 
said they had no access to shelter

64% 
did not have enough to eat


77% 
had no income

25% 
had no access to safe drinking water

62% 
had no access to bathing facilities

36% 
had no access to handwashing facilities

35% 
could not get to a toilet

36% 
said neglect and isolation, and denial of resources, opportunities or services were risks for older people





Samir Bol/HelpAge International

James lives with his wife and two married sons in a camp for internally displaced persons in South Sudan. He is in poor health but cannot obtain the medication he needs.

Out of sight, out of mind

To compound the difficulties older people face:

69%  said they did not know how to provide their opinion or make a complaint about the services being provided to them

27%  said that they could not cope at all. Only 19% said they felt able to cope without support

77%  said that they had not been asked by any other humanitarian agency about the services being provided to them

Only 3  of the needs overviews and humanitarian response plans for the 11 countries covered by this report included data specifically on older people

Given the shocking lack of data, and aid agencies' failure to speak to and understand older people, it is not surprising that humanitarian work so often falls short and excludes older people.

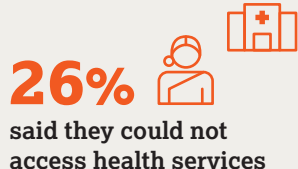
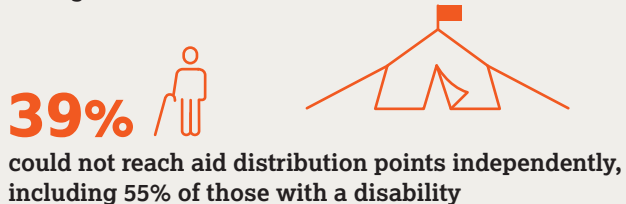
Damaging assumptions

In the absence of data and feedback from older people, aid workers often have to rely on assumptions. However, there can be a mismatch between these and the reality:

- One in five older people (20 per cent) were living alone, not with their extended family as often assumed.
- It is often expected that families are always the best source of support for older people. In humanitarian crises, many older people are highly dependent on their families and others to meet their needs. This is particularly true in protracted crises. However, humanitarian responses that increase older people's dependence may actually contribute to a reduction in older people's resilience and independence over time, increasing their risk of being subject to violence, neglect and abuse.
- Many older people play a significant role in their families and communities, though it is widely assumed they don't contribute:
 - Nearly two-thirds of those we interviewed (63 per cent) said that they were caring for at least one child, and 44 per cent were caring for another older person.
 - In some camps, older people have set up their own associations. Members monitor the situation of older people in the camps, visit those unable to leave their homes and flag up issues with camp authorities and humanitarian aid providers.

Services out of reach

We found that blanket approaches to delivering aid were preventing many older people from accessing even general services:



Worse for women

Women seem to be under greater strain than men. They accounted for 58 per cent of those living alone, 56 per cent of those caring for others, 56 per cent of those with no access to healthcare, 58 per cent of those with no access to food, and 58 per cent of those with no income. More women than men said that they could not cope at all (30 per cent compared with 23 per cent of men).

Time for change

Humanitarian responses continue to fail older people and undermine core humanitarian principles. Successive research studies have shown the impact of this neglect on older people.

A new approach is long overdue. The humanitarian community must now stand in solidarity with older people, addressing the issues revealed by this report that have contributed to their exclusion from humanitarian assistance, and fulfilling its commitment to humanitarian principles.

If not now, when?



Saul Uzategui/Convite

The ongoing crisis in Venezuela has left older people unable to access food and vital medication.



Karel Prinsloo/Age International

Now is the time to take action to ensure that older people are treated fairly and their rights upheld.

Summary recommendations

A more inclusive, effective and accountable response can be achieved by putting the following recommendations into practice:

1. Provide leadership

All humanitarian actors and agencies should proactively recognise and respond to the rights and needs of older people, the risks they face, as well as their capabilities and contributions.

They must: Include older people in funding guidelines, criteria and programme portfolios; advocate for the rights of older people within the international humanitarian system; invest in capacity building and designate focal points.

2. Mainstream older people's inclusion

All humanitarian actors and agencies must take responsibility for responding to the rights and needs of older people, alongside the work of specialist agencies.

They must: Integrate age into existing gender, disability and protection mainstreaming policies and action plans; incorporate the *Humanitarian Inclusion Standards for Older People and People with Disabilities* into humanitarian policy, guidelines and training; invest in programming to uphold older people's rights and meet their specific needs.

3. Strengthen data collection and analysis

All humanitarian actors and agencies must make efforts to improve data collection, analysis and disaggregation on the basis of age, as accurate information is essential to uphold humanitarian principles and basic human rights.

They must: Routinely collect, analyse and use data on age, sex and disability throughout the programme cycle including by interviewing older people directly as part of needs assessments; require funding proposals and reporting to include an analysis of the risks older people are facing and the extent to which humanitarian aid is supporting them.

4. Consult older people

All humanitarian actors and agencies must meaningfully consult older people and promote their participation and empowerment. This is essential to ensure humanitarian interventions are effective in responding to older people's rights and needs.

They must: Invest in programming that gives older people a stronger voice in humanitarian responses; provide accessible methods for older people to feedback on the humanitarian assistance and adapt programmes according to data, analysis and feedback.

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