

Disability, Displacement and Public Health: A Vision for Haiti

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ABSTRACT

Refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) with disabilities are some of the most neglected and socially excluded groups within any population. Natural disasters are events that cause bodily harm resulting in disability and that result in the displacement of people. Many predict a continual increase of natural disasters in the future due to changing climates. People with disabilities constitute one of the most vulnerable social groups in the case of a natural disaster. In 2010, Haiti suffered a devastating earthquake leading to great social, health and economic hardship including the displacement of people with disabilities. Due to the very extent of the structural devastation Haiti experienced and the international focus on assisting Haitians who suffered injuries leading to disabilities, there is an opportunity for Haiti to become a model for future disaster management in terms of mainstreaming the needs of people with disabilities in the restoration, resettlement and reintegration process.

Key words: People with disabilities; disabled persons; Haiti; disasters; best practice analysis; displaced persons; reintegration; public health

La traduction du résumé se trouve à la fin de l'article. *Can J Public Health* 2011;102(2):157-59.

This commentary highlights the situation of people with disabilities displaced by natural disasters, with a particular focus on Haiti which on January 12, 2010 was hit by a catastrophic earthquake of magnitude seven on the Richter scale. The article explores the opportunity for developing a series of best practices with regards to displaced people with disabilities in Haiti – practices that might be applicable to other natural disasters in the future.

The general situation

The health of displaced people, migrants and refugees is of concern to public health.¹⁴ According to a 2008 report, more than 10% of the world's 35 million displaced persons who fled civil conflict, war or natural disasters live with disabilities.⁵ These numbers are expected to rise as environmental events classified as natural disasters are expected to become more frequent.⁵ Although the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement states that people with disabilities are entitled to protection and assistance required by their condition and to treatment that takes into account their special needs,⁶ they remain among the most hidden, neglected and socially excluded of all displaced people today.⁷ Many assert that marginalized social groups, such as women, children, the elderly and people with disabilities, are most affected by disasters.^{8,9} The Haitian earthquake resulted in large numbers of disabled and non-disabled internally displaced people. Should the needs of people with disabilities be taken into account, Haiti could become a model case of best practices for restoration, resettlement and reintegration of displaced people with disabilities and one could apply the lessons learned in Haiti to improve restoration, resettlement and reintegration after future disasters.

The disaster in Haiti and people with disabilities

The UN estimated before the earthquake that there were as many as 200,000 children with mental or physical handicaps in Haiti;¹⁰ the overall number of

people with disabilities in Haiti was estimated to be around 800,000.¹¹ The disaster in Haiti resulted in there being many new displaced disabled people with their associated needs, and it made the lives of those already living with disabilities all the more difficult.¹² Because many people have had their limbs amputated, one can expect an enormous demand for wheelchairs and orthopaedic devices.¹³ Handicap International highlights on their webpage that patients who have received care or surgery often leave the hospital with no treatment advice, post-operative follow-up or rehabilitation. They have identified that Haitian patients will need continuous post-operative follow-up and rehabilitation work and assistive devices for many years to come.¹² Whirlwind Wheelchair International is sending rugged wheelchairs to Haiti for the thousands of Haitians who will survive with lasting mobility impairments. Portlight Strategies, Inc., an NGO focusing specifically on the needs of people with disabilities in Haiti, tries to link up with local organizations providing hands-on service to people with disabilities, such as the Lambi Fund of Haiti, several Catholic agencies, and other organizations. The Institute on Disabilities at Temple University, Association of Assistive Technology Act Programs and the Pass It on Center have launched a Haiti Disability Response effort for

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priority items such as crutches, walkers and canes. Other organizations involved in helping people with disabilities in Haiti include the PAZAPA Center for Handicapped Children Jacmel, Mobility International, US-AID and the Ecumenical Disability Advocacy Network of the World Council of Churches. With regard to Canadian involvement, the Christian Blind Mission sent various rehabilitation professionals to Haiti (for example, see ref.13); Team Canada Helping Hands was involved in rehabilitative measures even before the earthquake¹⁴ and a Rehabilitation team from Dalhousie University went to Haiti in the week following the disaster.¹⁵

Haiti: What has to happen? What would be good practices?

Haiti could become a model of how to deal with internally displaced people, especially people with disabilities. Best practices could be developed that would ensure that the needs of people with disabilities are taken into account. For this to become a reality, a few things must happen:

- The actions after the disaster, short and long term, have to mainstream the needs of people with disabilities. The Council of Canadians with Disabilities highlighted in its January 2010 newsletter that, working through the Canadian Council for International Cooperation (CCIC), it was able to include wordings related to people with disabilities in the “Canadian Civil Society Statement to the Foreign Ministers Meeting on Haiti”, a meeting that took place in Montreal, January 25, 2010. Among other recommendations put forward, it stated: “Ensure shelter and emergency camps are planned and built with disability access in mind. Include persons with disabilities and organizations focused on disability rights in all initiatives and stages of relief, recovery, reconstruction, and longer-term development planning...”¹⁶ The knowledge exists within the rehabilitation community as to how to deal with the needs of disabled people after disasters, which makes it a valuable partner. The 2007 Bonn Declaration¹⁷ of the International Conference “Disasters are Always Inclusive. Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Emergency Situations” highlighted for example many problems people with disabilities are facing; problems that very likely are also in evidence in Haiti after the disaster. It gives many recommendations for inclusive disaster preparedness planning, inclusive response in acute emergencies, immediate rehabilitation measures, and inclusive post-disaster reconstruction and development measures.
- Prejudice against people with disabilities in Haiti is seen as a major problem by people with disabilities and others^{18,19} with regard to the former’s integration into society. CIDA contributed \$234,602 in 2008 to the Réseau Associatif National pour l’Intégration des Personnes Handicapées (RANIPH) and others to support the integration of people with disabilities in Haitian society.²⁰ This support should be continued.
- Fixing and constructing the physical environment in Haiti is one of the main tasks to come. Many new and affordable materials and processes are on the verge of being used in construction with the aim of making buildings more resistant to earthquakes in the future. However, these measures will do nothing for displaced people with disabilities if the construction does not follow universal design.²¹ The Council of Canadians with Disabilities highlighted in its January 2010 newsletter that universal design and access for people with disabilities was, for example, forgotten in Honduras during the period of reconstruction after Hurricane

Mitch.¹⁶ Universal design is about the “design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.”²⁰ The Interim Haiti Recovery Commission (IHRC) has as one of its priorities the construction of transitional school buildings.²¹ These buildings should be accessible to people with disabilities. Another priority project of the IHRC is drawing interest in Haiti’s long-term reconstruction process and highlighting best solutions for future housing.²¹ These solutions for future housing should be guided by the universal design concept.

Another priority of the Interim Haiti Recovery Commission is the rebuilding of the water and sanitation infrastructure; for example, there are plans to build 348 water kiosks and 385 collective sanitary facilities.²¹ It should be ensured that the design allows people with disabilities to access them. To date, the mainstream water and sanitation discourse – such as all three editions of the World Water report – ignores the needs of people with disabilities, this in spite of the fact that the knowledge of how to make water and sanitation accessible exists within the community of people with disabilities.²²

The Haiti Relief Toolkit is a one-stop source for technical and practical information to help health workers respond to the earthquake relief efforts underway in Haiti. The toolkit covers the vital sectors in emergencies, including health, water and sanitation, food security, shelter and logistics.²³ Although various documents by numerous organizations in this toolkit state that relief products have to be accessible, no manuals describe how to achieve this access. The Global Partnership for Disability and Development – an alliance of People with Disabilities Organizations (DPOs), government ministries, bilateral and multilateral donors, United Nations (UN) agencies, NGOs, national and international development organizations – produced a toolkit for long-term recovery entitled “Haiti: Reconstruction for All”,²⁴ which covers the topics Physical Environment Livelihood, Employment and Social Protection, Transportation and Communication, Education Health, Capacity Building of People with Disabilities Organizations (DPOs) and Organizational and Operational Issues. This toolkit could be added to the Haiti Relief toolkit.

Very little in the mainstream media highlights the situation of people with disabilities in Haiti apart from the acute medical situation. Investment in the economy, job creation and increasing the level of consumption are frequently mentioned as priorities for Haiti. There is a risk that, with the country so shaken in its foundations, a hierarchy of interventions might be generated whereby the most able will benefit the most and the least able will be left behind.

CONCLUSION

Mainstreaming displaced people with disabilities into the recovery efforts after a natural disaster maximizes the achievement of medical and social health of people with disabilities and public health in general. If this can happen in Haiti, the country will be cited as a best practices case study of how to deal with people with disabilities after a disaster.

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Received: July 22, 2010 Accepted: October 2, 2010

RÉSUMÉ

Les réfugiés et les personnes déplacées à l'intérieur de leur propre pays qui ont aussi une incapacité sont parmi les groupes les plus négligés et les plus socialement exclus dans n'importe quelle population. Les catastrophes naturelles sont des événements qui causent des blessures corporelles incapacitantes et des déplacements de populations. De nombreuses voix prédisent une augmentation constante des catastrophes naturelles en raison du changement climatique. Les personnes handicapées sont l'un des groupes sociaux les plus vulnérables lors d'une catastrophe naturelle. Le tremblement de terre qui a dévasté Haïti en 2010 a entraîné d'énormes difficultés sociales, sanitaires et économiques, dont le déplacement de personnes handicapées. Étant donné l'ampleur de la dévastation des infrastructures et la mobilisation internationale pour aider les Haïtiens ayant subi des blessures invalidantes, Haïti pourrait devenir un modèle pour la gestion des catastrophes futures en intégrant les besoins des personnes handicapées dans le processus de restauration, de réinstallation et de réintégration.

Mots clés : personnes handicapées; Haïti; catastrophes; guide de bonnes pratiques; personnes déplacées; réintégration; santé publique