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**Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and  
the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly**

## **Emerging issues: the empowerment of people affected by natural and human-made disasters to reduce inequality: addressing the differential impact on persons with disabilities, older persons and youth**

**Note by the Secretariat\*\***

### *Summary*

Pursuant to Economic and Social Council resolution [2006/18](#), the programme of work of the Commission for Social Development has included the agenda item “Emerging issues” since its 2007–2008 review and policy cycle. Under this agenda item, the Commission addresses current issues affecting social development that require urgent consideration and new cross-cutting issues in the context of evolving global development challenges. At its fifty-seventh session, the Commission will thus consider the question of “the empowerment of people affected by natural and human-made disasters to reduce inequality: addressing the differential impact on persons with disabilities, older persons and youth”.

The present note has been prepared to provide substantive background information for the discussion of the topic. The note includes a review of the key issues, normative frameworks and current experiences and practices of Member States and stakeholders with regard to addressing natural and human-made disasters and their impact on persons with disabilities, older persons and youth. It also provides policy recommendations with the intent to empower such affected social groups, reduce inequality and advance their inclusion in the face of disaster situations.

\* [E/CN.5/2019/1](#).

\*\* The present report was submitted after the deadline to reflect a decision by the Bureau of the Commission for Social Development.



## I. Introduction

1. In the present note, the word “disaster” is used to refer to severe alterations in the normal functioning of a community or a society owing to the interaction of hazardous physical events with vulnerable social conditions. That can have widespread adverse human, material, economic or environmental effects that require emergency response to satisfy critical human needs and, possibly, external support for recovery. Disasters include natural and human-made hazardous events.<sup>1</sup> The increasing occurrence of natural and human-made disasters, and their impact, represent a major challenge for the world today. It is estimated that, in the 20 years between 1998 and 2017, climate-related and geophysical disasters resulted in the deaths of 1.3 million persons and left an additional 4.4 billion injured, homeless, displaced or in need of emergency assistance.<sup>2</sup> The consequences of extensive exposure to disasters are detrimental, and their impact hampers ongoing efforts to eradicate poverty (see [E/2018/26](#)). The World Bank estimates that, each year, \$520 billion in annual consumption is lost globally as a result of disasters, pushing some 26 million people into poverty.<sup>3</sup>

2. In 2016, more than 569.4 million people were affected by disasters, far more than the annual average of 224.1 million between 2006 and 2015.<sup>4</sup> While all populations face the risk of being exposed to certain disasters, the vulnerability of individuals to disasters, and the severity of the impact of disasters on people, vary, depending on their socioeconomic conditions, civic and social status and place of residence, as well as their ability to gain access to resources relating to mitigation, adaptation and relief. In developing and developed countries, persons with disabilities, older persons, youth and those living in poor and rural communities, in particular women, often experience the negative impact of natural and human-made disasters disproportionately.

3. Socioeconomic factors shape the structural inequalities that, in return, perpetuate and reinforce the poverty, marginalization and social exclusion of affected populations in the face of disaster situations. The achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development depends not only on combating natural and human-made disasters, but also on ensuring that those who are affected by natural and human-made disasters are not left behind.

4. Against that background, the Bureau of the Commission for Social Development chose “The empowerment of people affected by natural and human-made disasters to reduce inequality: addressing the differential impact on persons with disabilities, older persons and youth” as the emerging issues topic of the Commission at its fifty-seventh session. The selection of that topic also echoes the theme of the high-level segment of the Economic and Social Council and the high-level political forum on sustainable development for 2019. A high-level panel discussion will be organized during the fifty-seventh session of the Commission to deliberate on this timely issue.

5. The present note includes a review of the key issues, normative frameworks and current experiences and practices of Member States and stakeholders with regard to

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<sup>1</sup> See Christopher B. Field and others, eds., “Glossary of terms”, in Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Managing the Risks of Extreme Events and Disasters to Advance Climate Change Adaptation: Special Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters and United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, “Economic losses, poverty and disasters: 1998–2017”, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> World Bank, “Climate insurance”, results brief, 1 December 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Debarati Guha-Sapir and others, *Annual Disaster Statistical Review 2016: The Number and Trends* (Brussels, Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters and Université Catholique de Louvain, 2017).

addressing natural and human-made disasters and their impact on persons with disabilities, older persons and youth. The note also provides policy recommendations intended to empower those groups, reduce inequality and advance inclusion in disaster situations.

## II. Issues, trends and relevant international normative frameworks

### A. Disasters and their impact on persons with disabilities, older persons and youth: issues and trends

6. The situations of persons with disabilities, older persons and youth have gradually gained more visibility and attention in the current global policy discourses concerning disaster reduction and humanitarian actions. While high-quality data on disaster situations disaggregated by disability and age remain limited, available data seem to indicate that some social groups, such as persons with disabilities, older persons and youth, are at greater risk of, more vulnerable to and disproportionately affected by natural disasters, including extreme climate hazards.<sup>5</sup> For example, persons with disabilities, who constitute more than 15 per cent of the world's population, are particularly vulnerable to, and disproportionately affected by, disasters.<sup>6</sup> At the time of the earthquake and tsunami in eastern Japan of 2011, the mortality rate among persons with disabilities was more than twice that of the general population in the same affected regions.<sup>7</sup> Studies conducted on older persons faced with disasters revealed that half the deaths resulting from Hurricane Katrina were of adults 75 years of age and older.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, natural and human-made disasters can result in an increase in violent behaviour among survivors and their families, in addition to having long-term negative consequences for mental health, in particular that of children.<sup>9</sup> Young people are more likely than adults to develop psychiatric disorders in the aftermath of a disaster<sup>10</sup> and to be the victims of violence in the aftermath of a conflict.<sup>11</sup>

7. The exacerbated risks faced by persons with disabilities and older persons in disasters are widely acknowledged, yet their needs and aspirations are often overlooked in disaster relief. Their concerns are not adequately addressed in relevant local and national strategies and actions aimed at disaster reduction, response and

<sup>5</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Global Warming of 1.5°C: An IPCC Special Report on the Impacts of Global Warming of 1.5°C above Pre-industrial Levels and Related Global Greenhouse Gas Emission Pathways, in the Context of Strengthening the Global Response to the Threat of Climate Change, Sustainable Development, and Efforts to Eradicate Poverty* (forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *United Nations Flagship Report on Disability and Development 2018: Realization of the Sustainable Development Goals by, for and with Persons with Disabilities* (2018).

<sup>7</sup> Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, "Overview of natural disasters and their impacts in Asia and the Pacific, 1970–2014", March 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Joan Brunkard, Gonza Namulanda and Raoult Ratard, "Hurricane Katrina deaths, Louisiana, 2005", *Disaster Medicine Public Health Preparedness*, vol. 2, No. 4 (December 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Claudia Catani and others, "Family violence, war, and natural disasters: a study of the effect of extreme stress on children's mental health in Sri Lanka", *BMC Psychiatry*, vol. 8, No. 33 (May 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Zachary W. Adams and others, "Comorbidity of PTSD, major depression, and substance use disorder among adolescent victims of the spring 2011 tornadoes in Alabama and Joplin, Missouri", *Psychiatry*, vol. 78, No. 2 (2015).

<sup>11</sup> Hazem Adam Ghobarah, Paul Huth and Bruce Russett, "Civil wars kill and maim people – long after the shooting stops", *American Political Science Review*, vol. 97, No. 2 (May 2003).

recovery. There exist many critical gaps in disaster preparedness with regard to older persons and persons with disabilities. For example, older persons and persons with disabilities who have no personal emergency plans may not be aware of the availability of relevant resources that can help them to escape and evacuate; they face difficulties in communication, including not receiving early warnings in a timely manner, because disaster management information and guidance are often disseminated in a format that is inaccessible to them.<sup>12</sup> There are also challenges regarding the receipt of personal or medical support during emergencies, often resulting in missed opportunities for evacuation and other life-saving actions on the part of first responders.

8. Existing factors, such as disadvantaged socioeconomic status, inequalities, disability- and age-based discrimination, social exclusion and physical and institutional barriers, contribute to the predicament faced by persons with disabilities, older persons and youth in communities. Various barriers that exist in everyday life, including the inaccessibility of basic infrastructure, such as roads, transportation and buildings, and of information-related equipment, including information and communication systems, devices and services based on information and communications technology (ICT) tend to be intensified in a disaster situation. The lack of inclusive policies and participatory mechanisms and institutions represents a missed opportunity and a failure to consult and engage all affected community members in the development of strategies and plans to respond to risks and emergency situations. Moreover, natural disasters and humanitarian crises contribute to an increase in impairments, a factor that needs to be considered when planning for disasters and building more inclusive and resilient communities and societies.

9. There is strong evidence that older persons suffer disproportionately as a result of disasters. As shown above, the deaths of many older persons may have occurred in the aftermath of the disaster, reflecting shortcomings in the emergency response system, which, although it typically prioritizes assistance to vulnerable groups, frequently overlooks the needs of older persons. The vulnerability of older persons to disasters is, in part, a result of physical and health issues generally associated with old age, such as mobility and sensory impairments; limitations in intrinsic capacity, exacerbated by the loss of essential assistive devices; and interrupted access to essential medications. In addition, chronic disease management is typically not included in the health-related response to humanitarian emergencies. Ageism is manifested in various forms of exclusion of older persons in humanitarian policies, the negative attitudes of actors and the diminished role of older persons, as they lose control of community resources and assets in emergency situations.

10. A trend worth noting is that the number of older persons is projected to grow by 46 per cent globally between 2017 and 2030, outnumbering young people, as well as children under 10 years of age, and this increase will be greatest and most rapid in the developing world. As the world's population grows older and the number of disasters increases worldwide, an age-sensitive response to disasters becomes increasingly vital.

11. The increasing frequency and severity of disasters is likely to jeopardize the livelihoods of young people owing to displacement and reduced access to natural resources. In fact, natural resources represent a fundamental source of income for young people.<sup>13</sup> The loss of crops and livestock production caused by natural

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<sup>12</sup> National Organization on Disability, "Report on Special Needs Assessment for Katrina Evacuees (SNAKE) Project", 2005.

<sup>13</sup> United Nations Development Programme, *Green Jobs for Women and Youth: What Can Local Governments Do?* (New York, 2013).

disasters, estimated at \$96 billion over the period from 2005 to 2015,<sup>14</sup> is thus likely to affect young people in particular. Illiteracy is also a major issue affecting young people in conflict- and disaster-affected countries. Some 3 out of 10 young people between 15 and 24 years of age, girls and young women in particular, have not acquired basic reading skills.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, young refugees experience severe difficulties even obtaining access to secondary and tertiary education in their host countries (see [A/72/761-S/2018/86](#)). The lack of basic skills among young people, on the one hand, and grim economic and employment prospects in the aftermath of natural disasters or humanitarian crises, on the other hand, can result in the further marginalization of young people. Lastly, young people are often excluded from decision-making, and their capacities are not systematically utilized to design prevention and response efforts. Young people feel marginalized and misunderstood, in conflict settings in particular, and are often faced with negative perceptions and mistrust, all of which inhibit their meaningful contribution to disaster relief efforts. When addressing the specific needs of young people with regard to humanitarian actions, it is also important to recognize age, gender and diversity within that group.

## 1. Preparedness

12. A global survey on disasters and disability conducted in 137 countries showed that only 17 per cent of respondents with disabilities were aware of disaster management plans in their community and that 72 per cent of that group had no personal preparedness plan at all for disasters.<sup>16</sup> The survey also indicated that persons with disabilities remained largely alienated from emergency and disaster response planning. As few as 14 per cent of persons with disabilities said that they had been consulted during the formulation of a disaster management plan in their community, although half of respondents expressed a desire to participate in and contribute to their community's disaster management.

13. Studies have also revealed critical gaps in disaster preparedness on the part of older persons. A nationwide survey carried out in 2014 in the United States of America found that two-thirds of adults 50 years of age or older had no emergency plan, had never participated in a disaster preparedness educational programme and were not aware of the availability of relevant resources. More than a third of respondents lacked a basic amount of food, water or medical supplies in case of emergency.<sup>17</sup> In 2014, the commemoration of the International Day for Disaster Reduction was focused on older persons and included a survey in which 70 per cent of respondents expressed an interest in being included in decision-making on disaster planning and noted their wish to explain the special needs and vulnerabilities of older persons to disaster planners.<sup>18</sup> In a report on the state of the humanitarian system of 2018,<sup>19</sup> it is noted that, while steps have been taken to better meet the needs of women and girls, the special needs of older persons are often not met. Although older persons make up nearly 30 per cent of the population in need of humanitarian assistance, they are most likely to be overlooked in humanitarian programmes. These findings provide

<sup>14</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), *The Impact of Disasters and Crises on Agriculture and Food Security 2017* (Rome, 2018).

<sup>15</sup> United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), "A future stolen: young and out of school", data and analytics brochure, September 2018.

<sup>16</sup> United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, "Living with disability and disasters: UNISDR 2013 survey on living with disabilities and disasters – key findings", 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Regina A. Shih and others, "Improving disaster resilience among older adults", Rand research report, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, "Survey for older persons in potential disaster areas", September 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Knox Clarke, *The State of the Humanitarian System*, ALNAP Study (London, Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action, 2018).

powerful insights into how a one-size-fits-all approach poses significant challenges for the humanitarian system.

## 2. Response

14. In the global survey on disability and disasters discussed above, only 21 per cent of respondents with disabilities answered that they could evacuate immediately and without difficulty in the event of a sudden disaster; while 73 per cent would have certain difficulty and 6 per cent would not be able to evacuate at all. If given sufficient time, the percentage of those who could evacuate with no difficulty increased from 21 per cent to 38 per cent. Nevertheless, 4 per cent stated that they would not be able to evacuate at all.

15. When disasters or other crises hit, persons with disabilities are disproportionately affected. In most cases, they are not able to escape and are more likely to be left behind to fend for themselves.<sup>20</sup> They may also experience greater obstacles to evacuating, owing to a lack of accessible transportation, adequate shelter, information and communication.<sup>21</sup> In particular, persons with psychosocial disabilities or intellectual impairments may be more adversely affected. In the United States, a study revealed that, in the aftermath of three hurricanes, the evacuation rates were between 9 and 25 per cent lower in households in which a member of the family had a disability, compared with households that did not include such an individual.<sup>22</sup> Alarming, there have been an increasing number of reports on older persons who have died in care homes or assisted living residences, many allegedly abandoned by their caregivers. A study on flood disasters in Kenya found that, by incorporating vulnerable populations into the country's early warning systems, with a focus on protecting livelihoods, it was possible to mitigate the impact of such disasters, which are a significant cause of impoverishment in Kenya and the African region.<sup>23</sup>

16. In the context of humanitarian crises, because of poor identification and registration processes, refugees with disabilities are often underidentified, compromising the possibility of identifying and addressing barriers to obtaining access to assistance. The underidentification of disabilities is common among refugees as a result of an identification process that is often based on self-identification or the perceptions of the officer registering the refugee. In some settings, individuals are reluctant to self-identify because they wish to avoid stigma, while officers tend to record only visible disabilities, and sensory and mental disabilities are less easily identified than physical ones.<sup>24</sup> Additional challenges to identification include a lack of awareness and knowledge of tools for identification on the part of staff and the likelihood that persons with disabilities are isolated in their homes.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Lori Peek and Laura M. Stough, "Children with disabilities in the context of disaster: a social vulnerability perspective", *Child Development*, vol. 81, No. 4 (July/August 2010).

<sup>21</sup> National Organization on Disability, "Report on special needs assessment for Katrina evacuees (SNAKE) project".

<sup>22</sup> Marieke Van Willigen and others, "Riding out the storm: experiences of the physically disabled during Hurricanes Bonnie, Dennis, and Floyd", *Natural Hazards Review*, vol. 3, No. 3 (August 2002).

<sup>23</sup> Nilmi Senaratna and others, "Natural hazards and climate change in Kenya: minimizing the impacts on vulnerable communities through early warning systems", in Zinta Zommers and Ashbindu Singh, eds., *Reducing Disaster: Early Warning Systems For Climate Change* (Dordrecht, the Netherlands, Springer, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> HelpAge International and Handicap International, "Hidden victims of the Syrian crisis: disabled, injured and older refugees", 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *UNHCR Age, Gender and Diversity: Accountability Report 2016* (2017).

### 3. Unmet needs for services and support in disaster situations

17. The needs of persons with disabilities, older persons and youth are often overlooked in the aftermath of disasters, as such groups may face additional barriers to gaining access to services and assistance, including rehabilitation and assistive devices. In some countries, fewer than half the emergency and disaster relief sites and facilities are accessible to persons with disabilities.<sup>26</sup> Persons with disabilities and older persons often encounter physical barriers to obtaining access to basic services, such as safe drinking water and sanitation during evacuation. There is also a great risk of disability-based discrimination when basic services and resources are limited. In Haiti, in the aftermath of the earthquake of January 2010, although there was huge demand for services owing to new injuries caused by the disaster, rehabilitation services were insufficient.<sup>27</sup> In Jordan, notwithstanding stated policies assuring equal access of all refugee children to education, fewer refugee children with disabilities attended schools.<sup>28</sup> The needs of persons with disabilities and older persons are also excluded from long-term recovery and reconstruction efforts (CRPD/CSP/2015/4, para. 21). One reason that the needs of older persons are not met is that they are often not visible, owing to social isolation, mobility limitations or the assumption that they are being cared for by family members. Similarly, in the aftermath of a disaster, young people find it more difficult to experience smooth school-to-work transitions and to find decent employment opportunities. Disasters make it more likely that young people will remain on the margins of the labour market or will find lower-quality, hazardous and high-risk jobs.

### 4. Social and economic impact on individuals, their families and communities

18. Environmental and financial disasters and shocks can have a considerably negative impact on households with dependent household members, including older persons and persons with disabilities. They can lead to a decrease in income and assets, as well as to a reduction in food production, food stocks and food purchases. A United Nations study shows that, in four sub-Saharan countries in 2011, on average, a higher proportion of households with persons with disabilities (69 per cent) were negatively affected by shocks than households without persons with disabilities (58 per cent). In all four countries, most of the households with persons with disabilities indicated being negatively affected by a recent shock, ranging from 55 per cent in Ethiopia to 88 per cent in the United Republic of Tanzania. The highest gap between households with and without persons with disabilities was observed in Uganda, where 56 per cent of households with persons with disabilities, compared with 37 per cent of households without persons with disabilities, indicated a negative impact from a recent disaster. In addition, the effects of reduced household income often result in a decline in investment in the education of children and young people. The latter may be forced to drop out of school as a consequence of conflicts or natural disasters. When economic alternatives are lacking or of poor quality, the recruitment of young people by armed groups becomes more likely.<sup>29</sup> In developing countries, where many older persons are economically active, their income is disrupted by the loss of access to their work, land or property in disaster situations. The impact of disasters is also

<sup>26</sup> *Building Disability-Inclusive Societies in Asia and the Pacific: Assessing Progress of the Incheon Strategy* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.18.II.F.4).

<sup>27</sup> Michael D. Laundry and others, "Humanitarian response following the earthquake in Haiti: reflections on unprecedented need for rehabilitation", *World Health and Population*, vol. 12, No. 1 (2010).

<sup>28</sup> Mary Crock and others, *The Legal Protection of Refugees with Disabilities: Forgotten and Invisible?*, Elgar Studies in Human Rights (Cheltenham, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2017).

<sup>29</sup> James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, insurgency, and civil war", *American Political Science Review*, vol. 97, No. 1 (February 2003).

experienced by older persons who require support in processing paperwork for government assistance and insurance claims and hence become vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Lastly, in the aftermath of a conflict, the social consequences at the community level can be severe. This is demonstrated by the fact that an unprecedented 68.5 million persons worldwide, half of whom are 18 years of age or younger, have been forcibly displaced.<sup>30</sup> Conflict also affects, negatively and positively, the ability of community members to cooperate with one another at the local level, as well as their civic engagement.<sup>31,32</sup>

## 5. Discrimination, stigma and violence

19. Persons with disabilities, in particular children, older persons and young women, are more vulnerable to exploitation, violence and physical, sexual and emotional abuse in the aftermath of a disaster or a humanitarian crisis. Refugees with disabilities who are forced to leave their countries of origin, as well as those who are internally displaced, have specific protection-related needs and may experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination linked to disability, age, gender or status as refugees or internally displaced persons. The stigma faced by refugees and asylum seekers with disabilities is often compounded by xenophobia, racial discrimination and intolerance. That situation further undermines their dignity and equality of treatment, increases the risk of violence and abuse and limits their access to community support networks.<sup>33</sup> Older persons, in particular those left behind in conflict situations, face increased risks of violence as they become more vulnerable to physical, sexual and psychological abuse. Young people are often portrayed as passive beneficiaries of humanitarian response or as the perpetrators of political violence and social unrest. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the positive roles that young people, persons with disabilities and older persons can play in preventing and addressing natural and human-made disasters and in managing and preventing disasters more effectively.

## B. International normative frameworks for the inclusion and empowerment of persons with disabilities, older persons and youth in disaster and humanitarian actions

20. In recent years, international normative frameworks have been strengthened remarkably for the inclusion and empowerment of marginalized social groups, including persons with disabilities, older persons and youth, in agendas for disaster reduction, through non-binding and legally binding instruments. For example, in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, it is recognized that the rights of such persons are particularly exposed in situations involving emergencies and risks, and a framework is provided to guide inclusive preparedness, response and recovery actions. Article 11 of the Convention, specifies States' obligations to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of armed conflict, humanitarian emergencies and natural disasters (see [A/HRC/31/30](#)). The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002, calls for equal access to food, shelter and medical care and other services for older persons during and after natural disasters

<sup>30</sup> UNHCR, "Figures at a glance", Statistical Yearbook 2016 database, available at [www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html](http://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html).

<sup>31</sup> Michael J. Gilligan, Benjamin J. Pasquale and Cyrus Samii, "Civil war and social cohesion: lab-in-the-field evidence from Nepal", *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 58, No. 3 (July 2014).

<sup>32</sup> Travers Child and Elena Nikolova, "War and social attitudes", *Conflict Management and Peace Science* (2018).

<sup>33</sup> UNHCR, *UNHCR Age, Gender and Diversity*.

and other humanitarian emergencies (A/CONF.197/9, para. 55). The General Assembly, taking note of the work of the International Law Commission and the draft articles on the protection of persons in the event of disasters that were adopted at the sixty-eighth session of the Commission, in 2016, solicited the views of Member States concerning the recommendation by the Commission to elaborate a convention on the basis of the draft articles, with the view to considering options and providing further guidance on the work of the United Nations in this area (see A/73/229).

21. The cross-cutting nature of disaster risk reduction and the necessity of addressing the needs of, and the impact on, affected vulnerable social groups in disasters is well reflected in the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. For example, disability is notably referenced in the context of ending poverty in the call for building the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations (target 1.5), making human settlements sustainable and inclusive by protecting people in vulnerable situations from disasters (target 11.5) and combating climate change by enhancing capacities for effective climate change-related planning and management, with a focus on marginalized communities (target 13.b).

22. Increasingly, vulnerable social groups have been incorporated into recent global frameworks on disaster and humanitarian actions. In the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, a rights-based approach was adopted that called for accessibility and the inclusion of persons with disabilities, older persons and youth in disaster reduction policies and efforts at all stages of disaster reduction, as well as data disaggregation by disability and age.<sup>34</sup> In the Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (2015), it is noted that States should respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights, including the rights of persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations, when taking action to address climate change.<sup>35</sup>

23. The Charter on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action was adopted at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 and endorsed by many States and stakeholders. The Charter includes the commitment to striving “to ensure that services and humanitarian assistance are equally available for and accessible to all persons with disabilities, and guarantee the availability, affordability and access to specialized services, including assistive technology in the short, medium and long term”.<sup>36</sup> The inclusion of older persons in a global compact on refugees would be a crucial step towards ensuring that older persons are considered in displacement. In addition, the Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action recognizes the need to strengthen the role of young people in prevention, preparedness, response and recovery through the empowerment of and support for local youth-led initiatives and organizations.

24. At the Intergovernmental Conference to Adopt the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, which was held in Marrakech, Morocco, on 10 and 11 December 2018, delegates from 164 countries adopted the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, now known as the Marrakech Compact on Migration. The Compact was hailed as a historic step towards the prevention of suffering and chaos, although it does not create new legal obligations, but provides States with a framework to better meet existing legal obligations and address issues relating to migration at the international level.<sup>37</sup> The Compact contains specific

<sup>34</sup> General Assembly resolution 69/283, annex II, paras. 19 (d) and (g), and 36 (a) (iii).

<sup>35</sup> See FCCC/CP/2015/10/Add.1, decision 1/CP.21, annex.

<sup>36</sup> Charter on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action, Istanbul, 2016, available at <http://humanitariananddisabilitycharter.org/>.

<sup>37</sup> United Nations News, “Governments adopt UN global migration pact to help ‘prevent suffering and chaos’”, 10 December 2018. Available at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/12/1028041>.

provisions that call for actions that strengthen policies and practices in order not to exacerbate or unintentionally increase vulnerabilities of migrants, including by applying a disability-responsive approach, and that provide migrants in situations of vulnerability with necessary support at all stages of migration, through identification and assistance (A/CONF.231/3, annex, para. 23). The Compact also outlines the need to provide young migrants with lifelong learning opportunities, including vocational and on-the-job training and high-quality education (*ibid.*, para. 31 (f)). In addition, the Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience Recommendation, 2017 (No. 205), of the International Labour Organization (ILO) covers the need to support the inclusion of refugee women, young persons and others in situations of vulnerability in the labour market.<sup>38</sup> Advances to include marginalized groups have depended on the political will of stakeholders, and progress has been uneven among various social groups.<sup>39</sup>

### **III. Addressing the impact of natural and human-made disasters on persons with disabilities, older persons and youth: advancing empowerment, inclusion and equality**

#### **A. Risk and disaster reduction: responding to the needs of vulnerable groups**

25. Countries have taken various measures to incorporate issues and perspectives concerning marginalized social groups into national policies, laws and plans on disaster and humanitarian actions. For example, common practices have included considering the needs and perspectives of persons with disabilities in preparedness and response in national disaster or crisis response plans<sup>40</sup> and adopting legislation to prioritize issues relating to such persons in emergency and disaster response activities, such as medical, housing and humanitarian assistance.<sup>41</sup> In other cases, Governments have taken measures and aid-related actions to evacuate and provide primary health care for persons with disabilities (CRPD/C/PRT/1, para. 69), ensuring their rehabilitation and care support for recovery and reintegration into social life. After the adoption of the Charter on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action, many States started working with civil society organizations to address the multisectional factors that often left the population more vulnerable to disasters and other emergency situations. For example, measures were taken to support refugees with disabilities in humanitarian situations through the provision of services connecting refugee women and girls with disabilities to service providers from the humanitarian and development sectors<sup>42</sup> and raising awareness of the needs

<sup>38</sup> International Labour Organization (ILO) recommendation No. 205 on employment and decent work for peace and resilience, adopted by the International Labour Conference at its 106th session in 2017.

<sup>39</sup> United Nations, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *No time to retreat: First annual synthesis report of progress since the World Humanitarian Summit*, 2017.

<sup>40</sup> Uganda, Office of Prime Minister, *The National Policy for Disaster Preparedness and Management* (2010), art. 4.13; Lebanon and the United Nations, *Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2017–2020* (2017).

<sup>41</sup> Haiti, see Corp législatif, *Loi portant sur l'intégration des personnes handicapées*, chap. 12, art. 72. Available at <http://haitijustice.com/pdf/legislation/loi-sur-les-personnes-handicapees-haitijustice.pdf>.

<sup>42</sup> Women's Refugee Commission and the National Union of Women with Disabilities in Uganda, "Bridging the gap between development and humanitarian action: the role of local women's organizations – Case Study", available at [www.womensrefugeecommission.org/populations/disabilities/research-and-resources/document/download/1402](http://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/populations/disabilities/research-and-resources/document/download/1402).

and perspectives of refugees with disabilities at community events.<sup>43</sup> The public commitment of the Secretary-General to the development of a new policy, action plan and accountability framework to strengthen system-wide accessibility and the mainstreaming of the rights of persons with disabilities into the Organization's operations is expected to advance the mainstreaming of disability into the work of the United Nations with regard to disaster risk reduction, humanitarian emergencies and refugees.

26. The Employment Intensive Investment Programme of ILO represents a means to curb disaster-related risk while fostering reconstruction and the generation of short-term employment, in particular among youth, through the implementation of cash-for-work schemes.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, the channelling of employment-intensive investments into infrastructure, the social sector and environmental services can promote long-term sustainability for all jobseekers, including young people. The United Nations Youth Strategy, a new initiative of the Secretary-General, prioritizes supporting young people as catalysts for peace and security and humanitarian action. The Strategy recognizes the contribution and active role of young people in mitigating the risks of natural disasters. Thus, it is stated in the Strategy that the United Nations will strengthen partnerships and collaboration between Governments and organizations led by young people in order to design and promote disaster risk reduction initiatives and actions relating to climate change mitigation and adaptation.

## **B. Turning vulnerability into empowerment and resilience-building**

27. In that regard, measures taken by States are focused on engaging the affected social groups in question. For example, a growing number of countries are including persons with disabilities on disaster management committees or similar structures and mechanisms for monitoring and coordinating the implementation of emergency relief operations.<sup>45</sup> Countries are engaging persons with disabilities in disaster risk analysis and assessment,<sup>46</sup> as well as conducting awareness-raising activities on disability-sensitive and inclusive disaster risk reduction<sup>47</sup> and humanitarian emergencies.<sup>48</sup> The Major Group for Children and Youth and the stakeholder group on ageing are also contributing to the work of the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction in order to foster the engagement of youth and older persons in the implementation of the Sendai Framework. For example, through the Strategy's youth engagement platform, young people are taking part in policy design and monitoring in areas such as youth knowledge and advocacy relating to disaster risk reduction.

28. Training sessions for humanitarian actors in the needs of persons with disabilities and older persons are also becoming more common and, at times, placing emphasis on those facing multifaceted discrimination and challenges, such as women and girls with disabilities in Kenya.<sup>49</sup> The launch in 2016 of the Education Cannot

<sup>43</sup> UNHCR, *UNHCR Age, Gender and Diversity*.

<sup>44</sup> ILO, *Employment and Decent Work in Situations of Fragility, Conflict and Disaster* (Geneva, 2016).

<sup>45</sup> Kenya National Commission on Human Rights, *Compendium on Submissions to CRPD 2016* (Nairobi, 2016), para. 118.

<sup>46</sup> Zero Project, "Innovative practice 2018 on accessibility: inclusive evacuation strategies following a tsunami, earthquake, or volcano eruption" available at: <https://zeroproject.org/practice/pr181522idn-factsheet/>.

<sup>47</sup> Centre for Disability in Development, "Actions of Centre for Disability in Development", available at [www.cdd.org.bd/helpline/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/sdg.pdf](http://www.cdd.org.bd/helpline/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/sdg.pdf).

<sup>48</sup> Christian Blind Mission, "2010 Haiti earthquake: interview with our accessibility expert in Haiti", 9 January 2015.

<sup>49</sup> Women's Refugee Commission, *Working to Improve Our Own Future: Strengthening Networks of Women with Disabilities* (New York, 2016).

Wait fund also brought humanitarian and development communities together to increase the provision of education for children and young people in situations of crisis. Similarly, the launch of the “Humanitarian inclusion standards for older persons and persons with disabilities<sup>50</sup>” in 2018 was aimed at helping to address gaps in understanding the needs, capacities and rights of older persons and persons with disabilities and promoting their inclusion in humanitarian actions.

29. Various guidance and practical tools have been developed to strengthen the capacity of affected groups and professionals working on disability-inclusive disaster reduction and humanitarian actions. This includes guidance to humanitarian actors assisting older persons, persons with disabilities,<sup>51</sup> refugees with disabilities<sup>52,53</sup> and youth in responding to and recovering from disaster and emergency situations,<sup>54</sup> and to health sector actors working in emergency and disaster risk management.<sup>55</sup> In addition, the Young Scientists Platform on Disaster Risk Reduction is bringing together young scientists who can play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between disaster risk reduction-related science and policy. Ultimately, the active involvement of the Young Scientists can strengthen the evidence-based implementation of the Sendai Framework.

### C. From risk management and mitigation to prevention

30. As the frequency and severity of disasters increases with climate change, investing in disaster risk reduction is regarded as a cost-effective way to manage and mitigate these disasters and address their impact on affected populations.<sup>56</sup> Various initiatives are being undertaken to address the causes of vulnerability and build resilience, including by tackling inequalities faced by social groups and providing policy interventions that enhance the opportunities of affected persons. Many initiatives are intended to meet immediate post-disaster needs, for example, by providing persons with disabilities with cash transfers in the aftermath of a disaster or a humanitarian crisis. In Nepal, after the earthquake in 2015, a cash transfer grant was established, with disability as one of the five criteria for enrolment; in the Syrian Arab Republic, a cash transfer initiative was aimed specifically at refugees with disabilities.<sup>57</sup>

31. The experience of Haiti also shows that combining humanitarian assistance with development can foster positive labour market outcomes. An employment-intensive scheme aimed at constructing six micro-watersheds for more than 320,000 inhabitants provided jobs to 9,000 individuals, of whom some 75 per cent were young people, while also strengthening climate resilience.<sup>58</sup> Cash transfers and disability care can

<sup>50</sup> Age and Disability Consortium and others, *Humanitarian Inclusion Standards for Older People and People with Disabilities* (2018).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> UNHCR, “Working with persons with disabilities in forced displacement”, 2011.

<sup>53</sup> United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, “Disability inclusion guidelines”, 2017.

<sup>54</sup> UNICEF, *Guidance: Including Children with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action* (New York, 2017).

<sup>55</sup> WHO and others, *Guidance Note on Disability and Emergency Risk Management for Health* (Geneva, 2013).

<sup>56</sup> Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters and United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, “Economic losses, poverty and disasters: 1998–2017”.

<sup>57</sup> UNICEF, document UNICEF/2017/EB/13/Rev.1, para. 56.

<sup>58</sup> ILO, “Employment-intensive investment in Haiti”, 8 February 2017.

play a role in reducing inequalities by enhancing labour market participation,<sup>59</sup> in particular that of youth at high social risk.<sup>60</sup> Ultimately, cash transfers can strengthen social cohesion in the context of recurring shocks, as well as preparedness, when building on a community-based approach. For example, the *caisses de résilience* (resilience funds) approach provides community members with technical assistance in enhancing productivity and access to credit, as well as offering support to farmers' groups and women's associations, in order to strengthen social cohesion.<sup>61</sup> Empowering communities and all their members in the context of natural disasters and post-conflict situations can thus strengthen resilience and enhance preparedness while providing communities with need-based services.<sup>62</sup>

32. There are increased efforts to “build back better” with more user-friendly and accessible infrastructure and enhanced individual and institutional capacities. For example, there are initiatives to turn post-disaster reconstruction into an opportunity to improve the accessibility of the physical environment. In Nepal, accessibility standards were improved after the April 2015 earthquake.<sup>63</sup> Ecuador incorporated accessibility in the training programmes that had been provided to government officials and also designed inclusive early warning systems and developed rescue workshops for persons with disabilities. The Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung (Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development), the official development cooperation agency of Germany, is implementing a special international cooperative project entitled “Fighting causes of flight, reintegrating refugees”, which has been aimed at refugees with disabilities in a number of African and Asian countries. In Lebanon, the project has invested in the rehabilitation of school buildings while also promoting an inclusive school culture that enables Lebanese and Syrian children with and without disabilities to learn together in the same schools. The project also supports internally displaced persons with disabilities in Nigeria, where it addressed disability in a cross-cutting way in all its components while also taking account of disability-age intersectionality issues. With the objective of improving the efficiency and accountability of its policy interventions, the Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development is currently working with partners to develop a marker for gender, age and disability for further promoting inclusive humanitarian actions.

33. Promising practices and initiatives are aimed at reducing inequality, enhancing capacity and increasing opportunities to participate in society on the part of affected social groups. Some countries have taken actions to enhance the groups' social protection. The social security system of Belgium is complemented by free social assistance services for persons with disabilities and their families who are not covered by contribution-based regimes. In Kenya, the National Social Safety Net Programme is aimed at improving the well-being and resilience of all citizens, including vulnerable groups, such as persons with disabilities, youth and others. The outstanding features of the programme include ensuring budgetary allocation to such groups (1.5 billion Kenya shillings for persons with disabilities for the period from

<sup>59</sup> Anis Chowdhury, “Social protection for shared prosperity and inclusive growth”, paper prepared for the expert group meeting on strategies for eradicating poverty to achieve sustainable development for all, New York, May 2017.

<sup>60</sup> World Bank, “The contribution of social protection to the Millennium Development Goals”, August 2003.

<sup>61</sup> FAO, “Consolidating community resilience by strengthening households' social, productive and financial capacities through an integrated approach”, 2016.

<sup>62</sup> United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, *Building Disaster Resilient Communities: Good Practices and Lessons Learned – A Publication of the “Global Network of NGOs” for Disaster Risk Reduction* (Geneva, 2017).

<sup>63</sup> Zero Project, “Innovative practice 2018 on accessibility: inclusive post-earthquake reconstruction”, available at <https://zeroproject.org/practice/pr181243npl-factsheet/>.

2016 to 2017) and engaging cross-sectoral ministries, local communities, the private sector, households and other non-State actors in a multi-stakeholder partnership. In Malta, the Civil Protection Department has implemented a regional evacuation plan that facilitates the evacuation of all civilians to transport assets, taking full account of the needs and aspiration of persons with disabilities. Jamaica, in implementing its ICT for Development Strategy, has set clear objectives to ensure universal and affordable Internet access for all its citizens, including those in more vulnerable situations. Youth, older persons and persons with disabilities have been provided with not only needed devices, but also scholarships and opportunities to acquire ICT knowledge and skills. These measures have contributed to the improvement of the country's performance in the Networked Readiness Index (eighty-third out of 139 countries in 2016) and ICT Development Index (ninety-eighth out of 176 countries in 2017), which, in return, have contributed to the communities' increased resilience to disasters.

#### IV. Conclusion and recommendations

34. Available data suggest that a large number of persons with disabilities and older persons have no personal preparedness plan for disasters. When a natural disaster or humanitarian crisis hits, they are often left behind in the evacuation and are more likely to die or be injured as a result. Youth are also likely to be disproportionately affected by the unfolding of conflict and to suffer from the long-term consequences of natural and human-made disasters.

35. Persons with disabilities, older persons and youth have specific needs during and after disasters. These needs should be factored into disaster risk reduction planning, response and humanitarian action. It is also important to recognize that they are heterogeneous groups and vary significantly in their ability to cope during disasters. Member States and other stakeholders are taking actions to address not only the immediate needs of those marginalized social group affected by disasters, but also inequality and exclusion. Progress is also being made in linking disaster risk management with the long-term and broader sustainable development agenda in the economic, social and environmental spheres. While major gaps and challenges remain, new opportunities also exist to explore the full potential of policy-related tools, as well as to create synergies in efforts to advance social protection, inclusion, the empowerment of affected persons, human security, disaster risk reduction and environmental protection, with the focus placed on addressing unmet social demands, such as expanding the coverage of basic services, social security and the care economy. Such policy tools, if well designed and implemented, can create new sources of economic growth and decent job opportunities that have low or even positive environmental impact while promoting social inclusion and equality.

36. In view of those observations, the Commission may wish to consider the following recommendations for policy actions to further reduce inequalities, promote the inclusion and empowerment of affected populations, in particular persons with disabilities, older persons and youth, and to advance inclusive and sustainable disaster management and a resilient society for all:

(a) **Raising awareness of disaster reduction and prevention, among policymakers and other stakeholders, including affected social groups, such as persons with disabilities, older persons and youth;**

(b) **Developing and implementing national policies and programmes that include operational standards, tools and specific indicators for the inclusion and empowerment of persons with disabilities, older persons and youth in disaster preparedness, response and recovery;**

(c) **Implementing disaster risk reduction strategies that include social protection, including floors, and strengthen social policies that are designed to empower people, in particular persons with disabilities, older persons and youth who are disproportionately affected by disaster situations, with material and other resources and means to build their capacities and realize their potential;**

(d) **Investing in infrastructure, including through fiscal and other policy interventions, to ensure access to education, decent work, basic public services and equal opportunities for participation on the part of marginalized social groups in decision-making for disaster risk prevention and resilience;**

(e) **Developing disaster response-related infrastructure, services and information in a manner that is responsive to affected persons and accessible to them. Accessibility and “universal design”<sup>64</sup> should be applied and proactively promoted in all aspects and phases of disaster reduction and humanitarian actions;**

(f) **Promoting an inclusive and whole-community approach to disaster and humanitarian actions, including by encouraging and supporting close cooperation and partnership among multi-stakeholders, such as the private sector and civil society organizations;**

(g) **Involving and engaging persons with disabilities, older persons, youth and their organizations, including those in more vulnerable situations, in policy- and decision-making processes and at all stages of disaster and humanitarian actions, ranging from planning to implementation, evaluation and monitoring;**

(h) **Initiating efforts to promote the inclusion and empowerment of vulnerable groups in the early stages of life, including through education, through age- and disability-sensitive curricula and community-based interventions, because age- and disability-related stereotypes, social norms, behaviours and attitudes justify and enlarge existing disparities and the unequal treatment of persons with disabilities, older persons and youth;**

(i) **Building and strengthening the capacities of relevant disaster reduction institutions, professionals and major stakeholders, including affected social groups, in particular, youth, persons with disabilities and older persons, by responding to their needs while also empowering and supporting their full participation in and contribution to disaster and humanitarian response, reconstruction and broad socioeconomic development efforts in their communities and countries;**

(j) **Establishing and strengthening risk-reduction structures and mechanisms at the national and local levels that are responsive to the heightened risks and vulnerabilities of affected social groups, including persons with disabilities, older persons and youth, to violence, abuse and exploitation in disaster and humanitarian situations;**

(k) **Undertaking and strengthening evidence-based research, data collection and analysis on the situations of affected social groups in order to better inform and support relevant policymaking and the implementation of disaster management, humanitarian actions and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development for everyone.**

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<sup>64</sup> The present note follows article 2 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which refers to “universal design” as “the design of products, environments, programmes and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design”.