

WHEN THE STORM HITS: ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY, DISASTER PREPAREDNESS, AND THE RESILIENCE OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

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OVERVIEW OF THE PRESENTATION

- ❖ Introduction – disability, climate change and DRM programming and the prevailing realities.
- ❖ The Disability Rights Imperative of AT in DRM programming.
- ❖ Assistive Technology as the panacea to the disability panic during disasters.
- ❖ When Assistive Technology is on the margins: Practical realities from Malawi's Tropical Cyclone Freddy.
- ❖ Power of Assistive Technology in Disability Inclusive DRM actions.
- ❖ Recommendations for inclusive preparedness and building back better.

INTRODUCTION

- Climate-related disasters are becoming more frequent and intense in Southern Africa.
- The occurrence of disasters does not suspend the enjoyment of rights of PWDs, though.
- Disasters and humanitarian crises disproportionately affect persons with disabilities under all contexts – rescue, protection, health, food security, livelihoods, education, nutrition, WASH, transport, communication, emergency shelter and recovery.
- DRM interventions must be disability inclusive if rights of PWDs are to be safeguarded.
- In much of Southern Africa disability is often overlooked in DRM policy and practice – preparedness, during disasters and after disasters (recovery programming).
- Absence of effective and genuine consultation with PWDs and OPDs; poor disaggregated disability data collection and management; inadequate disability responsive DRM financial and technical investments; poor disability rights monitoring during emergencies and inadequate issue specific disability inclusive DRM research.
- Little is known about strategic, concrete and solid considerations for Assistive Technology (AT) during disaster risk management programming in Southern African countries. Yet, AT is at the core of defining the resilience of PWDs under the context of disasters.
- Communication barriers, loss of mobility & service dislocation/disruption affect PWDs.

THE DISABILITY RIGHTS IMPERATIVE OF ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY IN DISASTER RISK MANAGEMENT

- ❖ Assistive Technology (AT) is a fundamental human rights issue for PWDs in humanitarian emergencies – functioning, communication, mobility and participation. Access to AT is not an option!
- ❖ Article 11 of the CRPD – obligations of State Parties and humanitarian players to put up necessary measures for the protection and safety of PWDs disaster contexts including provision of AT items.
- ❖ Article 12 of the African Disability Protocol – consultation and participation of PWDs in all aspects of planning, implementation and monitoring of pre and post-disaster reconstruction and rehabilitation.
- ❖ Sendai Framework for DRR (2015-2030) calls for systematic investments in disability inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction including financial allocations for AT and devices to sustainably build resilience of persons with disabilities.

DISASTERS AND THE DISABILITY PANIC: ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY AS THE PANACEA

- ❖ In the Japan, during the Tsunami earthquake of 2011, the mortality rate of people with disabilities was double that of the general population.
- ❖ The Tropical Cyclone Freddy context in Malawi and other Southern African countries in 2023 showed that PWDs were at higher risk. Lacking Assistive Technology and loss of assistive devices resulted in considerable vulnerability and victimisation.
- ❖ Yet, poor disability data management continues to manifest in DRM interventions.
- ❖ Assistive Technology is significantly important to PWDs in climate action and DRR programmes.
Lack of Assistive Technology creates significant access barriers to PWDs. AT is very important:
 - ✓ Inclusive access to information on early warning – e.g. access to COVID-19 information.
 - ✓ Accessible communication on available services for the displaced people.
 - ✓ Mobility of PWDs to safer places, services and access to inclusive shelter.
 - ✓ AT is essential to prevent deteriorating conditions of vulnerability of PWDs.
 - ✓ Facilitating proper and inclusive rescue missions for safety of PWDs.
 - ✓ Assistive Technologies prevent secondary impairments and health conditions
- ❖ Early warning systems; contingency planning; preparedness planning should consider AT services.

THE DISABILITY FACE OF TROPICAL CYCLONE FREDDY IN MALAWI: WHEN ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY IS ON THE MARGINS

- ❑ Tropical Cyclone Freddy in 2023 disproportionately affected PWDs – 260,465 PWDs affected.
- ❑ About 10.3 percent of the people with disabilities in the affected districts were affected by the cyclone—132,837 female and 127,628 males in total. The affected districts had 1.1 million PWDs.
- ❑ A total of 47,424 people with disabilities (24,186 female) were displaced.
- ❑ The cyclone increased physical limitations of PWDs; constrained access to social services and brought secondary impairments.
- ❑ Loss of assistive devices by PWDs; and loss of bottles of sunscreen lotion by persons with albinism who were also cut from supplies by public health facilities due to damaged transport infrastructure (roads and bridges).
- ❑ The Tropical Cyclone Freddy post-disaster needs assessment report did not indicate the number of PWDs affected in terms of access to Assistive Technology.
- ❑ No assessment was made on the magnitude of PWDs' vulnerability and marginalisation due to absence and loss of assistive devices. No provision of assistive technologies was made.
- ❑ Cyclone Freddy recovery programming did not consider deliberate AT assessment or provision either. This is the routine approach to DRR or DRM programming in the region.
- ❑ Emergency shelters were not designed to accommodate AT users
- ❑ The Malawi Disability Council (MACODA) conducted its own rapid assessment on disability and AT which revealed critical gaps and poor understanding of DRM programmers on PWDs' priorities.

POWER OF ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY IN INCLUSIVE DRM ACTION: DISABILITY RESPONSIVE PREPAREDNESS AND BUILDING BACK INCLUSIVELY

- ❖ Provision of information using AT modes empowers PWDs to make sound decisions. They demand their rights from duty bearers.
- ❖ Rapid assessment of AT situation post-Cyclone Freddy in Malawi – this revealed the overlooked, neglected, unreported and unearthed AT plight of PWDs.
- ❖ In Malawi, the provision of appropriate AT commodities (wheelchairs, tricycles, hearing aids, white canes, sunscreen lotion) by MACODA was key to rehabilitate PWDs.
- ❖ Field identification exercises to assess and screen AT situations of PWDs for the replacement of damaged and lost assistive devices.
- ❖ Post-disaster assessment of conditions of PWDs to address their traumatic and mental health situations following damaged and lost assistive devices.
- ❖ Assessment of possible disabling conditions to address secondary impairments.
- ❖ Engagement of community groups of PWDs for needs assessment to gauge their AT needs during and after Cyclone Freddy – the case of MACODA's action.
- ❖ Recovery interventions under DRM should include AT situation evaluation and provision.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE ACTION: TOWARDS INCLUSIVE RESILIENCE BUILDING

- Consult, engage and involve PWDs and OPDs in DRR planning, implementation and monitoring – disability inclusion before, during and after disasters strike.
- Provide accessible information to PWDs on DRM processes – early warning systems; service provision under the context of disaster and
- Investments (financial and technical) towards inclusive disaster risk reduction for resilience of PWDs – AT analysis; capacity building; AT procurement; financial resources for reasonable accommodations etc.
- Effective and proper disability data collection and disaggregation in all DRR actions to understand diverse needs of different groups of PWDs.
- Holistic and comprehensive inclusion of AT in all clusters of DRM action.
- Promote and enhance AT consideration in disaster preparedness for effective response and to “Build Back Better” in recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction.
- Conduct Assistive Technology risk, situational and contextual assessments before during and after disasters for appropriate inclusive measures at all stages.
- Embedding AT in DRM policies and strategies and related sectoral policies in critically key.