



**UNHCR'S APPROACH
TO FORCIBLY
DISPLACED AND
STATELESS PERSONS
WITH DISABILITIES**

Introduction

Persons with disabilities include those with long term physical, psychosocial, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

An estimated 15 per cent of the world's population – one person out of seven – has a disability.¹ That would indicate that around 12 million people with disabilities² have been forcibly displaced by persecution, violence and human rights violations. But there is evidence³ that the real number can be higher in conflict-afflicted contexts. However, persons with disabilities are often under-identified at reception, which negatively impacts their access to protection and assistance.

Forced displacement disproportionately affects persons with disabilities, who are more likely to be left behind or abandoned. They are often at higher risk of violence, exploitation and abuse, face barriers to access basic services, and are often excluded from education and livelihood opportunities.

Persons with disabilities are not a homogeneous group. It is important to recognize the diversity of persons with disabilities and that women, men, youth, older persons, and persons with diverse types of disabilities are affected differently. Women, children, and older persons face an even higher risk of discrimination, violence and exploitation.

Forcibly displaced and stateless persons with disabilities have the same basic needs as other persons. In addition, they may experience difficulties in moving, hearing, seeing, communicating or learning. Barriers to fulfilling basic needs experienced by persons with disabilities amplify the often severe challenges posed by forced displacement amplify the often severe challenges posed by forced displacement.

The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded this situation. Refugees, internally displaced and stateless persons with disabilities were already less likely to access health care, education and employment opportunities. The prolonged pandemic has deepened the inequalities and hardships they face.

As with any other person, persons with disabilities contribute in different ways to their communities. But barriers to their participation need to be mitigated through proactive efforts on disability inclusion.

“States and other humanitarian and development actors need to shift from awareness of disability to a proactive human rights-based disability inclusion strategy” – Report to the UN Human Rights Council by Cecilia Jimenez-Damary, Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons.

Cover photo: “We face a lot of stigma and discrimination in our society. Some people say we are haunted or stare at us, but at school, the children accept who we are. I am studying law and want to defend human rights when I grow up.” - Sarai Lukoo, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, is 18 years old and was born with albinism. Her two younger brothers also have albinism. | © UNHCR/Guerchom Ndebo

¹ - According to the World Health Organization's estimation.

² - This is taken from global estimates for disability of 15% of the total population, applied to the 82.4 million globally displaced (UNHCR Global Trends - Forced displacement in 2020). ³ - see footnote on next page.

UNHCR's commitment to disability inclusion

UNHCR's work is guided by a rights-based approach to disability reflected in the [UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#), and focuses on the meaningful engagement of persons with disabilities in all decisions that affect them; this includes the identification and resolution of barriers – including environmental, attitudinal and communication barriers – preventing persons with disabilities from accessing and participating in programmes and activities on equal basis with others.

This understanding is reflected in the [Executive Committee Conclusion No. 110 \(LXI\)–2010](#), which stresses the importance for UNHCR to ensure that the rights of forcibly displaced and stateless persons with disabilities are met without discrimination.

UNHCR's [Age, Gender and Diversity \(AGD\) Policy](#) is one of the core tools to ensure that all forcibly displaced and stateless people enjoy their rights on an equal footing and participate meaningfully in all decisions that affect their lives, families, and communities. The Policy ensures that UNHCR's work is inclusive, accessible to all displaced people, and responsive to differing levels and types of needs and abilities. It reaffirms UNHCR's commitment to the equal enjoyment of rights, and recognizes that age, gender, disability and other aspects of diversity play a key role in influencing needs, protection risks and capacities.

For more information about the policy and annual reports, including progress on persons with disabilities, please access the microsite [Age, Gender and Diversity - UNHCR](#).

UNHCR embraced the [United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy](#), launched in 2019, undertaking necessary actions to meet the requirements of the 15 indicators of its accountability framework for both operations and the workforce. To meet this goal, UNHCR developed a five-year Action Plan for Disability Inclusion, based on an internal review to identify areas where the organization's approach to inclusiveness could be improved, and laying out the institutional and operational changes necessary to meet the UNDIS requirements for UNHCR's workforce and operations by 2024. While there remains much to do, important achievements have already been made through the whole-of-organization approach to meet and exceed the indicators of the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy. UNHCR shares progress against the Action Plan and the UNDIS accountability framework every year in the entity's reporting to the UN Secretary-General.

³ - See for example Summer Report Series – Disability Overview (HNAP Syria, 2020), which found that up to 29 per cent of internally displaced Syrians had a disability, and Vulnerability Assessment Framework – Jordan (UNHCR, 2019) which found up to 45 per cent of Syrian refugee households had at least one member with a disability.



Suzanne Nyamfura is staying with a host family in Sake after she fled Goma, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in the wake of the Nyiragongo volcano eruption. | © UNHCR/Guerchom Ndebo

Overview of disability inclusion across UNHCR

Capacity building | Continuous investment is required to build UNHCR and partner staff's awareness and ability to act on disability inclusion. UNHCR promotes access to training resources on disability inclusion for all UNHCR personnel and partners. A [Facilitator's guide on working with Persons with disabilities in Forced Displacement](#), published in 2021 and updated with an additional module on disability data in 2022, complements with hands-on training materials the existing [e-learning](#) and [Need to Know Guidance](#). The Facilitator's Guide was developed and introduced to all regions through an inter-agency [collaboration between UNHCR and the International Disability Alliance \(IDA\)](#).

Strengthening data for the inclusion of persons with disabilities | Under-identification of persons with disabilities presents a significant challenge to facilitating and monitoring their access to protection and assistance and to planning an inclusive response. At the Global Disability Summit in 2018, UNHCR committed to improving the identification of persons with disabilities by incorporating the Washington Group questions into continuous registration processes. As of 2021, the [Washington Group Questions on Disability Statistics](#) were integrated into UNHCR's registration system to better identify persons with disabilities at registration and during other data collection efforts.

UNHCR's new planning, budgeting and monitoring tool, COMPASS, includes an option to flag results that contribute to disability inclusion, enhancing UNHCR's capacity to monitor disability inclusion in operational delivery. It is expected that these enhancements will support UNHCR teams and partners to better identify persons of concern with disabilities and plan, implement and monitor disability inclusion across UNHCR's programming.

Partnerships | UNHCR recognizes the central role of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in taking decisions that affect their lives. UNHCR has been promoting partnerships with organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) following the principle of meaningful participation. At the global and regional level, OPDs have been important advocates for displaced people, while at a local level they provide important support in building the capacity of UNHCR and partners, including providing peer support and information on local services, among other activities.

As a result of commitments shared during the Global Disability Summit in 2018 and the Global Refugee Forum in 2019, UNHCR partnered with the [International Disability Alliance](#) to involve organizations of persons with disabilities in building links between host and forcibly displaced persons with disabilities. The partnership encompasses areas of mutual capacity building, meaningful participation in humanitarian coordination, advocacy and monitoring of the [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#), and implementation of the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy. For more information about this collaboration, please visit [Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons with Disabilities | International Disability Alliance](#).

At an operational level, UNHCR continues to work with Humanity & Inclusion (HI) and other NGOs working with persons with disabilities. A new global partnership started in 2021 with HI to provide technical support on disability inclusion to the [Global Protection Cluster](#) (GPC) and national protection clusters. Through this partnership, the GPC will work to remove barriers to safety and protection for persons with disabilities through strengthening the monitoring of rights violations and enhancing meaningful participation in the humanitarian programme cycle.

Innovation | As evidenced by [research](#) conducted by UNHCR and partners, the increasing use of the digital space to access information, protection, education and job opportunities, has exacerbated the risk of exclusion for refugees with disabilities, who face multiple and intersecting barriers to access assistive technology and the internet. UNHCR's [Innovation Team](#) works to enhance access for persons with disabilities to digital technology and connectivity.

Good practices and examples | There are numerous practical examples that exemplify UNHCR's commitment to the inclusion of people with disabilities. The scope and variety of approaches highlights that disability inclusion is gaining a stronger cross-cutting role across the organization.

- UNHCR adapted its response to the pandemic to ensure uninterrupted support for persons with disabilities. Across regions, UNHCR reported targeted services for at least 55,672 women and men with disabilities and 7,948 girls and boys with disabilities, including targeted cash and material assistance during lockdowns. UNHCR field operations organized over 11,000 targeted home visits and nearly 10,000 rehabilitation sessions, taking protective measures against COVID-19. UNHCR supported at least 3,474 children with disabilities in accessing education through financial support, adapted learning podcasts, WhatsApp channels, sign-language lessons for preschoolers and home-based programmes for children with disabilities.
- In line with the objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees and its Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, in Cyprus, UNHCR advocated through the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities for the inclusion of refugees with disabilities in national disability assistance schemes. As a result, the Cypriot authorities issued a decision to extend the disability assistance schemes to refugees on equal basis with other citizens.
- A regional collaboration with [RIADIS](#), the Latin American Network of Organizations of Persons with Disabilities, led to the production of a [report](#) and a call to action on the situation of refugees with disabilities in the Americas and the development of [accessible videos](#) on COVID-19 prevention, gender-based violence, and humanitarian action.
- A Digital Accessibility Bootcamp brought together refugee-led organizations and organizations of persons with disabilities to advance [UNHCR's work on digital inclusion](#), including for refugees with disabilities.
- The successful performance of the first ever [Refugee Paralympic Team](#) underscored the power of sport to promote inclusion, and the excellent collaboration of the Regional Bureaux in sending six athletes to Tokyo. UNHCR's communications efforts helped to make this a global trend on social media.

Magartu's Story

Magartu studies alongside students without disabilities for the first time since she fled from Ethiopia – and she is now among the top in her class. The 16-year-old Ethiopian refugee lost her eyesight at a young age and has learned to adapt to life without it. Magartu was just eight when she and her older brother and sister fled Ethiopia due to conflict. When they arrived at Kenya's Kakuma camp, her siblings immediately enrolled her in Tarach Primary School – a special school for children with disabilities.

In sixth grade, Magartu transferred to a mainstream school, where children with disabilities integrate with other learners. The staff and students were welcoming and supportive. UNHCR and education partners Lutheran World Federation, Finn Church Aid, and Humanity & Inclusion piloted inclusive education in several schools in Kakuma camp and the adjacent Kalobeyei settlement,

including Magartu's former school. Learners with disabilities share classrooms with other students, resulting in a less discriminatory and more inclusive atmosphere for them. Through sharing a classroom with other students and joining in extra-curricular activities like sports and clubs, she started to feel a new confidence.

***"I had no competition in the special school as I was the only learner in grade six. So, whatever marks I got, I was always first in my class,"** Magartu explains. **"I liked my new school because I had competition. I was courageous enough to believe that I could be first in my class. Who am I not to be number one."** Read the full story [here](#).*



Magartu Dedefi, 16, from Ethiopia, is a student at Mogadishu Primary School in Kakuma Refugee Camp, northwestern Kenya. | © UNHCR/Samuel Otieno

Operational challenges

- 1 UNHCR works to ensure that all operations collect and use data following an intersectional approach by disaggregating data by age, sex and diversity characteristics, including through the collection and use of disability disaggregated data. UNHCR will promote the use of the [Washington Group Short Set Questions](#), incorporated in UNHCR registration systems as of 2021 to support the identification of persons with disabilities at registration, among partners and Member States when those are responsible for the registration of refugees.
- 2 Continuous investment is required to build the capacity of UNHCR, forcibly displaced people and partner staff, including at sectoral level on issues of disability inclusion. In addition to previous resources, UNHCR developed a Facilitator's Guidance on working with persons with disabilities in forced displacement,⁴ in collaboration with the International Disability Alliance.
- 3 There is also a need to promote the meaningful participation of refugees, internally displaced and stateless persons with disabilities across refugee-led organizations and the disability movement. UNHCR works in partnership with the International Disability Alliance to promote meaningful participation across humanitarian coordination and towards the upcoming second Global Refugee Forum in 2023.

⁴ Available at UNHCR - [Persons with Disabilities](#)



Omar, a Colombian refugee with a disability, talks with a woman with a disability at the municipal market in Esmeraldas, Ecuador. | © UNHCR/Jaime Giménez

Needs – How to support UNHCR

For UNHCR, disability inclusion is an institutional commitment and an operational priority. UNHCR is committed to ensuring that all persons of concern enjoy their rights on an equal footing and participate meaningfully in the decisions that affect their lives, families and communities. UNHCR urgently needs donor support to ensure that refugees and displaced persons with disabilities have access to protection, assistance and solutions all around the world.

Areas of focus for UNHCR in 2022 include strengthening participation of organizations of persons with disabilities in refugee response through capacity-building and operational partnerships; strengthening identification and registration of persons with disabilities using the Washington Group Questions, integrated in UNHCR registration system as of July 2021; and empowering refugees with disabilities to access digital spaces through innovation grants.

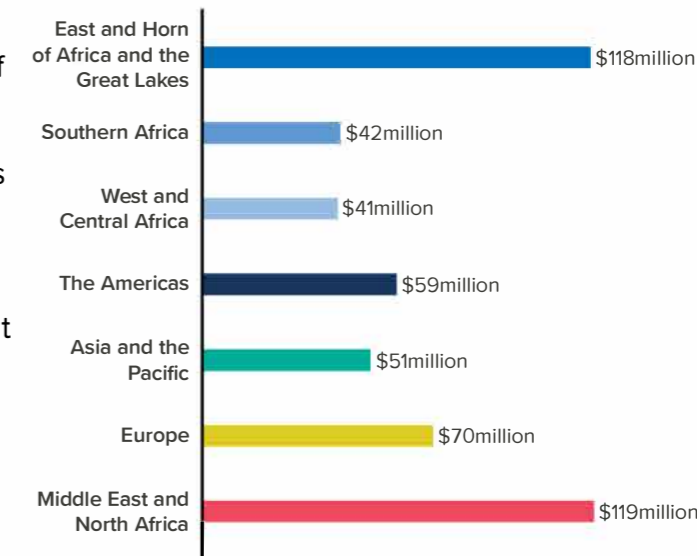
Within its regular annual programme for 2022, UNHCR's needs for activities related to persons with disabilities and disability inclusion are integrated in its new Global Results Framework, under the Outcome Area "Community engagement and women's empowerment", which has overall global needs of **\$507 million in 2022**. This reflects the multi-faceted response to protect and assist persons with disabilities.

Regional needs

Regional needs are greatest in the Middle East and North Africa as well as the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region.

UNHCR encourages unearmarked contributions to allow funds to be used [flexibly](#) to implement its needs-based programmes as fully as possible. Detailed information on UNHCR's annual programme budget is always available at www.reporting.unhcr.org.

For more information about UNHCR's work with persons with disabilities, please visit [UNHCR - Persons with Disabilities](#).





Second-generation Afghan refugee Jamil was born with dwarfism and entrenched community views on disability meant he was unable to attend the school in his village in northwest Pakistan. Now aged 33, he has dedicated his life to removing barriers that prevent refugees with disabilities from attending school in Pakistan, and to changing attitudes about what they can achieve. | © UNHCR/Saiyna Bashir



Sudanese asylum-seekers Mohamed and his family at Rome's Fiumicino airport after disembarking from a UNHCR evacuation flight from Libya before being transferred to reception facilities. | © UNHCR/Valerio Muscella



Yousif, 29, is an Iraqi refugee, father of three and a DAFI scholar, living in Amman, Jordan. | © UNHCR/Mohammad Hawari

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For more information or questions, please visit [UNHCR - Persons with Disabilities](#). You may also contact [Ricardo Pla Cordero](#) and [Lisa Holmberg](#).

