



# From Strategy to Reality Disability Inclusion in the Australia Assists Program

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australia

*"We might not have the  
answers. They do."*

— Australia Assists deployee





**Australia Assists** is the Australian Government's humanitarian civilian deployment program. Managed by RedR Australia, technical specialists are deployed to help overseas partners prepare for, respond to and recover from natural disasters and conflict. The Program's approach to strengthening disability inclusion in humanitarian action is set out in the Australia Assists Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2024, available on the RedR website.

Photo credit: © UNICEF /Modola

# From Strategy to Reality

## Disability Inclusion in the Australia Assists Program

**Fifteen percent of the world's population have a disability — and this number can increase during a disaster. According to CBM Australia, people with disabilities are often the most negatively affected by disasters and humanitarian crises:**

- Before a disaster, information on preparedness and early warnings is often not available in accessible formats, so people with disabilities are less aware of and prepared for what to do during a disaster or emergency.
- During the crisis, people with disabilities face barriers, and are unlikely to be able to evacuate. They can be left behind, be separated from family, and lose their assistive device.

- After the emergency, people are often 'invisible' and inadvertently excluded from accessing life-saving services such as food distribution, medical care, shelter, water, sanitation, and hygiene.

The Australia Assists program recognises that disability inclusion is critical for humanitarian resilience, response, and recovery efforts to be effective. And yet, meaningful support for people with disabilities in humanitarian disasters continues to be limited.

To find out how disability inclusion can work in practice for Australia Assists deployees, program delivery partner RedR Australia (RedR) recently spoke with a number of their roster members to understand how they have been able to approach disability inclusion in the course of their work.

**Here's what we heard.**



**L-R:** RedR Australia's Essentials of Humanitarian Practice (EHP) course, supported by Australia Assists, and Australia Assists deployees Vivienne Topp and Ted McDonnell.

# How have Australia Assists deployees been able to include people with disabilities in their work?

Australia Assists deployees have been successfully finding ways to consider disability within a range of different skill areas, and across all areas of the humanitarian cycle: resilience, response, and recovery.

## Resilience

Australia Assists deployees have been working to ensure disaster preparedness efforts don't leave people with disabilities behind. Below is a snapshot of the interview findings.

- Deployees have linked their host organisations and other in-country disaster stakeholders with local **disabled people's organisations**, who are able to share examples of what disability inclusion can look like in practice in the local context.
- A deployee was able to provide technical support to their UN agency colleagues on the **two-way link between disability and nutrition**, the need to ensure

food distribution is targeting those most in need, and how to address barriers experienced by vulnerable people at **food distribution sites** and in **school feeding and livelihoods programmes**.

- Deployees used their existing knowledge of disability inclusion to introduce tools to ensure information about people with disabilities was able to be captured in the national **displacement tracking system**. This means in future disasters the government's National Disaster Management Office will be in a position to make decisions based on accurate and comprehensive information.



People with disabilities are often thought of as a 'vulnerable group'. Actually the vulnerability is created by society and the barriers people face. People with disabilities have resilience and determination. We need to recognise this and build it further.

*- Australia Assists deployee*





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## Response

Australia Assists deployees have been working to make sure crisis response efforts actively consider the needs of the full affected population, including people with disabilities.

- In the Rohingya crisis response, deployees worked to provide clean **water and sanitation**, adapting communal latrine designs to consider universal design standards, as well as meeting the need to provide specific adapted sanitation solutions at household level for the individual needs of people with severe levels of impairment.
- One deployee ensured that disability inclusion is considered in **cash for work** programming, by making adaptations to work practices and providing support such as transport and different tools.
- In protracted displacement settings, deployees advocated to ensure **education** needs assessments were identifying the specific barriers children and young people with disabilities were facing to access ongoing education. Deployees were also actively supporting early identification and referral of children with disabilities.



**The point is to cover the full society. When reacting to a disaster we need to remember that there could be sectors of the population who are not readily observable because of stigma or because they might be hidden by their community.**

*-Australia Assists deployee*

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## Recovery

Australia Assists deployees have been implementing inclusive disaster recovery and reconstruction activities to make sure communities are removing barriers as they build back better.

- One deployee piloted community-based **disability access checklists** to enable refugees with disabilities themselves to check how accessible their schools and education facilities were.
- A deployee facilitated people with disabilities to **tell their own stories** and show their experiences of long-term displacement using photos and videos. This helped to ensure that decision-makers heard their perspectives, and remembered to consider disability inclusion in their planning.
- Deployees have helped to make sure the **reconstruction of public buildings** after Tropical Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu applied accessibility and inclusion standards. The national office for the Vanuatu Society for People with Disability was also reconstructed with the deployee's support.

# Enablers – what makes disability inclusion easier for Australia Assists deployees?

## A strong commitment from RedR

Disability inclusion within disaster preparedness and humanitarian action is a core priority for the Australia Assists program and delivery partner RedR. Inclusion is no longer an option, but a necessary element of effective humanitarian action. Many deployees are now aware

of the need to consider people with disabilities, and this drives them to take action. Some deployees reported feeling more confident to raise the importance of disability inclusion following discussion with RedR in the initial stages of their deployment.



Disability is not always at the forefront of our minds. So keeping that mandate visible to people helps ensure we remember disability, gender, and social inclusion.

*-Australia Assists deployee*



It's about listening and speaking to people with disabilities. We might not have the answers. They do.

*-Australia Assists deployee*



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## Using the Humanitarian Principles, and the localisation and accountability to affected populations agendas to advocate for disability inclusion

Meeting need everywhere it exists, and ensuring the affected population themselves are involved in decision-making about the humanitarian assistance they receive are key priorities in the humanitarian sector. Some deployees have reported being able to leverage off these existing commitments and priorities to independently take forward disability inclusion. Disability is a normal part of human diversity, and there will always be people

with disabilities among the population affected by a disaster or humanitarian crisis. Therefore, to be successful in supporting localisation also requires consideration of the involvement of people with disabilities. To be meeting need everywhere it exists also requires removing the barriers people with disabilities face. As one deployee put it: “Progressing disability inclusion is therefore a key part of helping humanitarian actors to meet their own commitments.”

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## Engaging with people with a lived experience of disability

Enabling deployees and their in-country colleagues to engage with and hear directly from people with a lived experience of disability is often an important ‘light-bulb’ moment for inclusion. People with disabilities can and should actively participate in decision-making about disaster preparedness and response, not just as passive recipients of emergency assistance. A key principle of disability inclusion is ‘nothing about us, without us’. When deployees apply this principle, they report that they do not feel the pressure to come up with disability inclusion solutions alone, but instead are able to take steps to get advice

from those who know best – people with disabilities themselves. Local disabled people’s organisations have been supported to attend workshops and cluster meetings, and deployees have acted to modify meeting locations and workshop activities to ensure people with different impairment types can fully participate. Even in more challenging contexts such as refugee camps where there may not be established disabled people’s organisations, deployees were able to find self-help groups and informal networks of people with disabilities who are linked to one another.

# Barriers – what challenges are deployees still facing?

## Lack of confidence to find ways to adapt humanitarian interventions to consider disability inclusion

The 'how to' of disability inclusion within resilience/response/recovery programming can be challenging. Deployees may be aware of the need for disability inclusion and be on board with its importance, but may feel like they don't have the experience or technical understanding to easily identify implementation options and entry points.

With many demands and busy workloads, deployees often don't have the necessary time to build in-depth understanding of the situation of people with disabilities that would support them to identify entry points for inclusion within their work. Lack of on-the-job support, knowledge sharing, and peer-to-peer learning all contribute to this barrier.

## Limited evidence and data

Deployees also noted that there is not always reliable data on the number of people with disabilities in a particular location or among a population affected by a disaster. This means deployees do not have contextual information about people with disabilities, nor the data to use as evidence for advocacy on the need for disability inclusion within their host organisation, sector, or cluster's work. Sometimes the only available data indicates very low prevalence

of disability compared to the global prevalence of 15 percent. This can perpetuate the idea that there are not people with disabilities in the area and there is no need to take action for disability inclusion. Overcoming these challenges can be difficult for deployees. As one deployee stated: "We can get hung up on data. But let's not wait for it. Let's identify the barriers to understand why we aren't seeing people with disabilities in our programmes."



**The first challenge was to find people with disabilities. They are normally inside the house and don't come out. Locating these people without proper data is a challenge.**

*-Australia Assists deployee*



## A perception that disability inclusion is something 'extra'

Partly due to these previous challenges of limited data and lack of awareness of the small changes that can be made to facilitate disability inclusion in humanitarian action, individuals with a disability often continue to get left out in the midst of perceived competing priorities. The focus during humanitarian response is on life-saving interventions, and there is often limited scope, time, or budget to go beyond providing the bare minimum assistance.

The perception is that doing the greatest good as quickly as possible means leaving out inclusion, because it can be perceived as too time-consuming and expensive. As one deployee put it: "People with disabilities get put aside when other priorities emerge like preparing for floods and monsoon, or responding to a cholera outbreak, etc."



**Disability issues are given support on paper and in theory, but not always in reality. People with disabilities get put aside when other priorities emerge like preparing for floods and monsoon, or responding to a cholera outbreak, etc.**

*-Australia Assists deployee*



**I am not able to direct who the attendees [of a workshop to develop emergency SOPs] are. It is a government-level decision. But when we suggest [disability organisations], the organisers are generally happy with this and acknowledge leaving them out had been an oversight. So disability is not always something people have thought of, given their other priorities.**

*-Australia Assists deployee*





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# What's next?

RedR will take forward these ideas of enablers and barriers, and find ways to support deployees to involve people with disabilities in the course of their work. **RedR will:**

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- Support more disability-specific deployments.
  - Continue to offer on-the-job mentoring on disability inclusion to all deployees.
  - Develop and share resources such as tip sheets, with examples of entry points and stories from other deployees about disability inclusion across different sectors and skill areas.
  - Generate and publish more practice-based evidence of the enablers and barriers to inclusive humanitarian action.

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— CBM Australia



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