

Canada's International Assistance and the Disability-Food Insecurity-Conflict Nexus

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Issue

At a time of heightened global uncertainty due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, Canada has an unprecedented opportunity to advance the rights of persons with disabilities through its international assistance programming, particularly with respect to the nexus of disability, food insecurity and conflict.

Background

Social protection measures for persons with disabilities have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (ESDC 2020). While persons with disabilities are already one of the most marginalized and vulnerable groups, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in increased burdens and deeper marginalization. Nearly one billion persons with disabilities (which amounts to 15% of the world's population) have experienced and will continue to experience negative physical, economic and social impacts as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (United Nations 2020). Moreover, disability often intersects with other vulnerable identity factors, such as gender and age. To illustrate this point, one in five women is likely to experience disability during her life, while 46% of persons over 60 years of age have a disability (United Nations 2020), and only one in five persons with significant disabilities living in the Global South has access to disability benefits (UNPRPD 2021). Moreover, aid programming that specifically targets persons with disabilities is massively underfunded. According to the OECD's Official Development Assistance

(ODA) data, only 0.3% of all ODA funding was spent with the principal objective of disability inclusion in 2019 (OECD 2022).

The number of persons with disabilities is only going to grow as a result of pandemic-induced global food insecurity and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Specifically, global food insecurity has risen dramatically in the past two years, greatly affecting persons with disabilities, particularly in developing countries where food insecurity is already disproportionately high (IDRC 2021b). In addition, the international disability community faces a massive humanitarian crisis as the war in Ukraine unfolds (European Disability Forum 2022). The time for bold leadership is now.

Canadian Leadership

Historically, Canada has been a clear leader in international disability advocacy. In 1992, Canada organized and hosted the first International Conference of Ministers Responsible for the Status of Persons with Disabilities. Canada was instrumental in hosting the Mine Ban Convention in 1997, notable for being the first international arms treaty to explicitly recognise the rights of persons with disabilities (Naggi and Frigerio 2007). Both Conservative and Liberal governments have shown bipartisan support for the rights of persons with disability through initiatives such as the Muskoka Initiative on Maternal, Newborn, and Child Health in 2010 and the implementation of the Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) in 2017. The Government of

Canada also co-founded the Alliance of Champions for Mental Health and Wellbeing in 2018, which supports global mental health initiatives related to the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, the UN Human Rights Council, and the World Health Organization (WHO) (Public Health Agency of Canada 2018). More recently, in 2021, Prime Minister Trudeau announced a ministerial mandate to provide greater assistance to persons with disabilities in developing countries (Trudeau 2021). Most recently, Canada participated in the second Global Disability Summit which highlighted Canada's renewed commitments to support local disability rights organizations in developing countries through the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI) and advance disability inclusion in the paid and unpaid care agenda (Global Disability Summit 2022).

Still, Canada could do more. Though Canada's FIAP asserts "an approach based on human rights" and purports to take into account all forms of discrimination, including discrimination based on ability, the FIAP does not include a disability lens. It is noteworthy that the FIAP does not mention the terms "disability" or "persons with disabilities" at all (Global Affairs Canada 2017). Moreover, Global Affairs Canada's initiative, the CFLI, aims to provide funding for international "small scale, high-impact" projects in over 125 countries (Global Affairs Canada 2015). Yet, despite priorities including gender equality and human rights, the CFLI does not include disability advocacy as a priority. Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) also fails to prioritize or mention disability in its new 10-year plan "Strategy 2030" (IDRC 2021a). In sum, Canada's current international assistance programs i) insufficiently acknowledge disability as a priority and ii) lack recognition and funding for persons with disabilities. But by ensuring all of Canada's international assistance includes a human rights-focused response that identifies persons with disabilities as a priority – specifically in issue areas such as food insecurity and conflict – Canada can fulfill its commitment to providing international assistance that is rights-based and inclusive.

CRPD and HRBA to Mainstream Disability

As a party to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), Canada has an obligation to not only adopt, but mainstream a human rights-based approach (HRBA) to disability in

its international assistance programming. The CRPD adopts the social model of disability conceptualization, meaning disability is not to be understood as an inherent lack of ability in individuals with impairments, but rather, a result of shortcomings in the society that fails to remove the socio-environmental barriers that disable them. To remove such barriers, the CRPD explicitly outlines key areas of concern that all States Parties must recognize and incorporate into their decision-making, four of which are particularly relevant to Canada's international assistance programming:

- Article 32 recognizes the significance of international cooperation in supporting national-level efforts to remove disabling barriers for those State Parties that may lack the capacity to do so. Accordingly, Canada must ensure that all international assistance programmes are "inclusive of and accessible to persons with disabilities" (CRPD, Article 32 *a*), while also increasing targeted efforts to assist developing countries' accessibility capacity-building (CRPD Article 32 *b*).
- Article 28 recognizes "the right of persons with disabilities to an adequate standard of living for themselves and their families, including adequate food" and the need for State Parties to "take appropriate steps to safeguard and promote the realization of this right without discrimination on the basis of disability" (CRPD Article 28 1). As such, Canada's food production and nutrition-related international assistance initiatives must ensure appropriate steps are taken so persons with disabilities have full access to the initiatives' benefits.
- Article 11 recognizes that "States Parties shall take [...] all necessary measures to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk, including situations of armed conflict" (CRPD Article 11). Thus, Canada's international assistance in conflict-affected areas or for conflict-affected individuals must uphold this article by establishing disability inclusive emergency responses such as establishing accessible settlements for those fleeing conflict.
- Article 31 obligates all States Parties to collect appropriately disaggregated statistical and research data in order to identify existing barriers and "formulate and implement policies" that remove such barriers.

In short, Canada should further advance disability inclusivity in the areas highlighted by the first three articles – namely, disability-related international assistance, food security, and conflict – by assisting disability-related data collection (as outlined by the fourth article) in each area and at the intersection of the three.

Canadian International Assistance and the Disability-Food Insecurity-Conflict Nexus

As mentioned above, the CRPD recognizes that, both independently and through mutual reinforcement, crises such as food insecurity and conflict act as significant barriers for persons with disabilities in developing countries to enjoy their fundamental human rights. Thus, there is a critical opportunity for Canada to uphold the rights of persons with disabilities by mainstreaming accessibility capacity-building in food security and peacebuilding international assistance initiatives.

According to the International Disability Alliance (2018), the links between disability and food insecurity are complex and bidirectional. While food insecurity can lead to disability through inadequate living conditions, malnutrition, and a lack of access to healthcare services, disability can also lead to food insecurity through a lack of employment opportunities, education, and access to social services and assistive technology (IDA 2018). Globally, approximately 2.3 billion people suffer from some form of food insecurity (UNHCR 2020). Among these populations, persons with disabilities and their households experience a greater risk of both hunger and malnutrition and face significant barriers to engaging in the food production sector (UNHCR 2020). In developing countries, persons with disabilities also often face much greater levels of stigma and discrimination, making them disproportionately vulnerable to food insecurity (IDA 2018). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the SPOON Foundation are seeking to address this by advocating to make nutrition programs, services, and policies inclusive of the nutritional needs of persons with disabilities in developing countries. However, Canada's international development efforts facilitated through the IDRC, for example, continuously fail to address the nexus of disability and food insecurity. Moreover, women and girls with disabilities in developing countries are particularly food insecure despite 79% of the agricultural workforce being made up of women and girls (Global Affairs Canada 2017). That said, there are also very few

humanitarian interventions in place that work to address this discrepancy and enable women and girls with disabilities to make contributions to food security within their communities. Canada can therefore play a key role in strengthening the agency of persons with disabilities – specifically women and girls with disabilities – within the food sector in developing countries through inclusive and rights-based food security programming.

Similarly, the stigma towards persons with disabilities often results in a disproportionate impact on persons with disabilities in conflict settings (IDA 2018). Despite the disproportionate impact of conflict on persons with disabilities, their needs in humanitarian responses reflect that they are often neglected in disaster planning and response (Commonwealth of Australia 2015). During the stage of active conflict, persons with disabilities may be targets of cluster killing or simply disproportionately affected by the dangers of immediate conflict. Women and girls with disabilities are specifically labelled as “easy targets” by perpetrators of sexual violence (Ortoleva 2017). When fleeing conflict, persons with disabilities may themselves feel or be regarded by others as a burden to their caretakers or community by slowing down their migration journey (Human Rights Watch 2019). Persons with disabilities in conflict, particularly those in poverty, depend on their social network to ensure their safety and ability to flee conflict (Pisani & Grech 2017). This indicates the need for development strategies to ensure the safe evacuation of persons with disabilities which does not disproportionately jeopardize their own and their caregiver's safety. Furthermore, conflict plays a central role in the injuries or traumatic experiences contributing to individuals being made disabled. For instance, increased restrictions enacted by states to secure borders from migrants and refugees have led to migration routes escaping conflict zones becoming increasingly inaccessible for persons with disabilities. Dangerous conditions may even actively disable individuals fleeing conflict zones (Pisani & Grech 2017). Finally, the post-conflict reconstruction phase is an imperative period of opportunity to develop more inclusive standards and include persons with disabilities in the reconstruction process. This period not only allows for persons with disabilities to receive justice, but it also provides an opportunity to set up the foundation for subsequent paths of a disability inclusive society which become increasingly difficult to alter over time (Power & Close 2012).

Furthermore, the nexus of disability, food insecurity and conflict remains an elusive and largely unexplored issue. On the one hand, lack of food and rises in the price of food have been the source of many past and current conflicts around the world (World Bank Group 2010). On the other hand, conflict can cause severe disruptions to economic activities, resulting in food shortages that threaten the livelihoods of entire populations. Food insecurity and conflict are thus mutually reinforcing issues that disproportionately impact already vulnerable populations such as persons with disabilities. However, a lack of data on the nexus of disability, food insecurity and conflict continues to inhibit the ability of governments to provide inclusive and human rights-based international assistance.

The February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has intensified the global food crisis by interrupting the planting, harvesting, and exporting of Russia's and Ukraine's major crops (Tazrouti 2022). These include goods such as wheat, cereal, cooking oil, and meat. This has led to an unprecedented surge of 19.7% in global wheat prices in March 2022 and created shortages for those reliant on Russia and Ukraine's exports (Ahmed 2022). Keeping in mind that Russia and Ukraine account for approximately one third of global wheat exports, the World Bank predicts that should this conflict continue, hundreds of millions more people around the world will be pushed into poverty and malnutrition (BBC 2022). Vulnerable populations such as persons with disabilities will be among those hit the hardest by these shortages, as they are already disproportionately impacted by food insecurity.

Additionally, of the estimated 2.7 million persons with disabilities living in Ukraine, many are now at significant additional risk as a result of the war (Clifford 2022). As the conflict continues, Canada must prepare for an increased number of persons being made disabled during the conflict by exposure to traumatic events and injuries that result in mental and physical disabilities. Current support systems are insufficient for persons with disabilities; as the population of persons with disabilities increases due to conflict, already-burdened support systems will begin to fail. Multiple reports have shown Russian troops actively targeting centres housing persons with disabilities (Clifford 2022). An NGO based in Ukraine, Fight for Right Ukraine, (2022) has called for the urgency to develop inclusive humanitarian responses and collaboration with refugee organizations and persons

with disabilities organizations immediately. Given that critical information regarding safety and evacuation is rarely circulated in accessible formats, persons with disabilities have faced extreme difficulties fleeing active conflict zones, which has often resulted in abandonment (Clifford 2022). Despite the significant barriers persons with disabilities face, they play an instrumental role in the overall wellbeing and diversity of their communities (UN 2006). Given this, and their right to an adequate standard of living, it is imperative that Canada acknowledge persons with disabilities as rightful beneficiaries of all humanitarian intervention. Persons with disabilities are between two to four times more likely to die or be injured during emergencies or disasters than others as a result of the lack of planning and accessible assistance (Frost 2020). These deaths are preventable. Humanitarian relief and development programmes must ensure that persons with disabilities are not left behind and are not the victims of non-inclusive disaster relief programs.

Recommendations

Taking into consideration the various challenges associated with the Disability-Food Insecurity-Conflict Nexus, we recommend that GAC:

1. **Mainstream disability in Canada's international assistance by developing a guidance note explicitly highlighting the interconnection of the FIAP and persons with disabilities through an HRBA.** In accordance with the Article 32 of the CRPD, Canada must ensure that its international assistance policies are "inclusive of and accessible to persons with disabilities" (CRPD, Article 32 *a*). A guidance note in accordance with the FIAP should be developed which i) explicitly uses the terms "disability" and "persons with disabilities" in order to increase recognition of disability in international assistance policy, ii) provides an in-depth analysis of the intersection of gender equality with disability accommodation, and iii) identifies the importance of facilitating the human rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities. This guidance note should be developed using the UN's Inter-Agency Standing Committee's Guidelines on the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action (IASC 2019) and the WHO's Community-Based Rehabilitation Guideline (WHO 2010).

2. **Fund more disability-targeted initiatives through the CFLI.** GAC has committed to “supporting local disability rights organizations and organizations of persons with disabilities through the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives” (Global Disability Summit 2022). To achieve this goal while making disability more visible in Canada’s international assistance operational policy framework, GAC should add “inclusivity of persons with disabilities” to the list of its “Priorities” pertaining to the selection of local initiatives to fund, as well as to the list of “Thematic Priorities” for each country’s “Calls for Proposals” (Global Affairs Canada 2015). While disability inclusivity should always be considered for initiatives targeting other existing priorities - particularly those relating food security and peacebuilding in accordance with CRPD Articles 28 and 11 - explicitly including disability-related issues in the CFLI’s priority policy facilitates mainstreaming of disability in Canada’s international assistance.
3. **Fund research conducted in and for developing countries relating to the nexus of disability and food insecurity.** A lack of data on persons with disabilities, their needs, and the barriers they face in developing countries continues to impact Canada’s ability to plan and deliver inclusive humanitarian interventions and implement the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 2: Zero Hunger. Disaggregated data collection relating to the intersection of disability with other vulnerable identities and issues areas such as food insecurity is thus needed. GAC can facilitate this by funding participatory research projects in developing countries that align with the specific targets and indicators of Goal 2: Zero Hunger. These projects can be carried out in partnership with local researchers, NGOs such as SPOON and other governmental departments such as the IDRC’s Climate Resilient Food Systems division. Such data collection should prioritize accessibility and allow local persons with disabilities to assist in setting critical research objectives. GAC should also ensure specific provisions for those who identify as women and/or other marginalized identities.
4. **Canada should ensure all humanitarian programs accurately identify and collect data on the number of persons with disabilities in conflict zones.** In accordance with Article 31 of the CRPD and GAC’s Global Disability Summit commitments, Canada should facilitate the collection of statistical and research data to ensure more effective policies that support persons with disabilities in all international development programming. Canada may seek to cooperate with organizations such as the UNHCR to identify and register persons with disabilities in displaced peoples’ settlements, such as refugee camps.
5. **Fund initiatives targeting the nexus of disability, food insecurity and conflict.** Prioritize initiatives that are already established in developing countries. Strengthen the capability of persons with disabilities to exercise greater influence over their food systems through programs such as the SPOON Foundation. Renew funding for global Maternal, Newborn, and Child Health (MNCH) following the structure of Canada’s Muskoka Initiative. Support persons with disabilities in active conflict zones by collaborating with Fight for Right Ukraine.

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