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To cite this article: Brigitte Rohwerder (2013) Intellectual disabilities, violent conflict and humanitarian assistance: advocacy of the forgotten, Disability & Society, 28:6, 770-783, DOI: 10.1080/09687599.2013.808574

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2013.808574

Published online: 06 Sep 2013.

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Intellectual disabilities, violent conflict and humanitarian assistance: advocacy of the forgotten

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(Received 1 August 2012; final version received 21 May 2013)

This article examines the experiences of people with intellectual disabilities in violent conflict who have been neglected in practice and academia. Such invisibility, combined with the disabling impact of society, their low priority, and the nature of their impairments, results in a disproportionately negative impact of conflict on people with intellectual disabilities. Drawing on a wide range of sources, including humanitarian workers, this article examines their experiences and analyses how much consideration has been given to people with intellectual disabilities in humanitarian assistance policy and practice in light of their increased need and vulnerability. Lack of awareness and recognition of their diverse experiences can result in their needs failing to be adequately met, which compounds their disproportionately negative experience of conflict. It is important to finally start paying attention in order to ensure their inclusion in humanitarian responses.

Keywords: intellectual disability; conflict; humanitarian assistance; human rights; advocacy

Too often invisible, too often forgotten and too often overlooked. (Guterres in Women’s Refugee Commission 2008, 1).

Points of interest

- This article looks at the experiences of people with intellectual disabilities in violent conflict, about which little is known.
- What is known is that their invisibility, low priority, the disabling impact of society and the nature of their impairments result in a disproportionately negative experience of conflict.
- They face increased risk of death and injury, both deliberately and as a consequence of their disabilities; abandonment; problems accessing services; and neglect in the post-war reconstruction phase.
- The lack of knowledge means that there seems to be little consideration of people with intellectual disabilities in humanitarian assistance policy and practice despite increasing recognition that people with disabilities are an at-risk group.

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The diversity of disability is not always recognised, which hides people with intellectual disabilities and their specific needs.

It is important to increase awareness of the experiences of people with intellectual disabilities in violent conflict in order to reduce their vulnerability.

Introduction

In all wars and disasters, it is persons with disabilities that are first to die; persons with disabilities that are the first to get disease and infection; and it is persons with disabilities who are the last to get resources and medicines when they are handed out. They get treated at the bottom of the pile. (Stubbs in Women’s Refugee Commission [WRC] 2008, 6)

There has been increasing acknowledgement that there are elements of the population requiring additional consideration due to the discrimination and marginalisation they face in society, including ‘the elderly, women and girls, minority groups and people with disabilities – [who] can become the most vulnerable in a time of crisis’ (Niskala 2007, 9). However, Couldrey and Hersson (2010, 2) point out that it is ‘not (yet) common practice … to include people with disabilities among those who are considered as particularly vulnerable in disasters and displacement and who therefore require targeted response’. Within this, people with intellectual disabilities are ‘more often than not, a completely hidden population’ (Balfour-Poole 2011).

For people with intellectual disabilities, often too narrowly defined as a condition of significantly below-average cognitive functioning combined with limitations in adaptive behaviour (Grove, Grove, and Myerscough 2010, 85), the disabling impact of society means they regularly miss out on opportunities, are denied their rights, and face rejection by others (Inclusion International 2006). Widespread stereotypes and negative attitudes severely limit their access to basic services such as health or education and results in their exclusion, neglect, and invisibility in society (Eds. JofDID 2011). This leaves people with intellectual disabilities ‘generally more prone to abuse and maltreatment, whether psychological, physical, emotional or sexual’ (Grove, Grove, and Myerscough 2010, 88). Their impairment ‘affects their ability to understand complex ideas, to adapt to environments, to learn from experience and problem solving’, all of which ‘presents challenges in the context of emergencies’ (Northway 2011), especially in a society that is not inclusive or understanding of their needs.

This article examines the experiences of people with intellectual disabilities pre-conflict, during conflict and post-conflict, looking at the direct and indirect impact of conflict on them and their experiences of flight and refugee, before going on to look at the consideration of people with intellectual disabilities in humanitarian policy and practice. Data were gathered from an extensive review of relevant literature (including grey literature), as well as conferences, interviews and correspondence with various humanitarian organisations, including, but not limited to, Save the Children, Oxfam, Handicap International, CBM, UNICEF, and Action on Disability and Development.

It is important to state that the term ‘vulnerable’ in this article should not be taken to indicate helplessness on the part of people with disabilities; rather, it indicates the scale of the challenges they face. As Hemmingway and Priestly (2006, 64) point out: ‘[p]eople with disabilities are disproportionately vulnerable primarily
as a consequence of social disadvantage, poverty and structural exclusion, rather than because of any “natural vulnerability”.

### Gaps in the literature

An overview of the literature via a search of Proquest – a repository for 20 academic databases – and a Google search, using the terms ‘intellectual disabilities and war/conflict’, indicated that thus far there has been little engagement with disability in conflict contexts. Further searches for ‘disability/intellectual disability’ were also made of the websites of various humanitarian organisations and relevant United Nations agencies. Within the few texts that do engage, people with intellectual disabilities are under-represented, receiving more than five mentions in only 10 of the 39 (of 109 retrieved texts) most focused on disability in conflict. At the time of the data collection (July 2011) there were only two documents found that directly addressed the experiences of people with intellectual disabilities in conflict. One highlights the paucity and inaccuracy of information on disability in conflict, especially in relation to intellectual disabilities, and examines the effects of war on them (Grove, Grove, and Myerscough 2010). It provides an important yet brief introduction to the topic. The second is a report from Kenya providing first-hand evidence about the experiences of people with intellectual disabilities and their families of the election violence, but lacking analysis (Burugu 2008).

Thus, much of the existing evidence is anecdotal and little focuses directly on the experiences of people with intellectual disabilities. This lack of information means that there is a lack of awareness of the needs of persons with disabilities in crisis situations, especially of people with intellectual disabilities, which impacts on how these needs are addressed. There is, however, increasing interest and efforts to gather data, such as the 2008 WRC study of refugees with disabilities. However there seems to be a tendency to lump the experiences of disabled people together, and while there are many similarities this serves to hide important differences that should be acknowledged, especially when it comes to persons with intellectual disabilities.

With only two documents examining conflict and intellectual disabilities there is clearly a need for more work examining the experiences of people with intellectual disabilities. This is reflected in the recommendations of the recent ‘Disability in Conflicts and Emergencies’ conference for the need to address the ‘gap in research and knowledge about the needs of persons with intellectual disabilities in emergencies and situations of conflict’ (Sæbones 2011, 3). More still needs to be done to establish a broader and deeper evidence base of the experiences of people with intellectual disabilities in conflict situations, but this article attempts to address this gap by highlighting the limited information that exists and drawing attention to the shared and individual experiences of people with intellectual disabilities in conflict and humanitarian assistance, which have thus far been largely forgotten in narratives of conflict and assistance.

### The struggle for rights

From a human rights perspective, ‘the intellectually disabled rank among the world’s most vulnerable and at-risk populations both because they are different and because their disability renders them less able either to assert their rights or to protect
themselves from blatant discrimination’ (Koh and Gostin 2003, 2). The attitudes that place barriers in the path of the development of human rights for persons with disabilities are similar to those that lead to stigma and discrimination, which in an ‘emergency setting is life-threatening’ (Sparrow, Large, and Whiting 2007, 13). These attitudes have resulted in weaker protections and value being placed on the lives of people with intellectual disabilities, which combined with the nature of their impairments leaves them additionally vulnerable, yet neglected, in humanitarian emergencies. However, instruments such as the new United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) offer the potential for greater protection by combating negative stereotypes and prejudices against persons with disabilities that have resulted in a disabling society (Lecomte and Mercier 2009, 65) and by ‘raising disability issues in a humanitarian context’ (Kett 2011).

**Low priority: the situation prior to conflict**

In many contexts, the disabling impact of society, with its physical, institutional and attitudinal barriers, means that disability is considered a low priority for attention and funds. This has resulted in a situation in which persons with disabilities are marginalised, with people with intellectual disabilities being one of the ‘most marginalised and vulnerable groups’ of all (Eds. JofDID 2011, 3), and facing a ‘significantly higher risk of poverty and social exclusion than other groups’ (Letavayova 2011, 18). This has a knock-on effect on their family, who often have to bear the brunt of providing support, which can leave them impoverished and in some cases excluded, as a result of negative social attitudes towards their family members with disabilities (WRC 2008, 12).

Letavayova (2011, 18) argues that in developing countries the needs of people with intellectual disabilities are neglected by the community and public authorities as a result of the combination of extreme poverty and deep-rooted social stigma caused by prejudice, superstitions and strong negative attitudes towards people with intellectual disabilities and that this often leads to the exclusion of whole families from the community. Similar attitudes are also found in developed countries, where, for example, disability hate crime is on the increase (Burn-Murdoch 2012). Such exclusion leaves people with intellectual disabilities facing greater problems in dealing with the consequences of the crisis as they start from a position of less resources and weaker support structures; their vulnerability increasing in the shocks and crises that come with conflict and the destruction of existing support networks.

**Direct targets: (intellectual) disabilities in violent conflict**

Persons with disabilities have been direct targets during violent conflict (Gulu Disabled Persons Union 2010, 18). Perhaps the most notorious and large scale is the case of the ‘wild euthanasia’ (Herr 2003, 117) of persons with disabilities in Nazi Germany, where an estimated 90,000–270,000 were killed (Owen 2009, 28; Herr 2003, 117). Inspired by ideas of social Darwinism, persons with disabilities were deemed not fit to live because their lives were held to be of less value and ‘not worth living’ as they were ‘useless eaters’ (Herr 2003, 118).

Similar attitudes persist in recent times, with anecdotal evidence from Sierra Leone suggesting that persons with disabilities were deliberately shot dead by soldiers to ‘put them out of their suffering’ (Harris 2003, 21). In Rwanda, although the
motives are not clear, almost all of the 700 patients ‘with learning difficulties and mental health problems in Rwanda’s psychiatric hospital’ were killed (Light 2003).

Watson and Griffith (2009, 78) argue that people with intellectual disabilities continue to have a low value placed on their right to life, resulting in euthanasia and murder, through actions such as abortion, withholding of medical procedures, drug overdoses, and ‘mercy’ killings. If the right to life of people with intellectual disabilities is not considered of equal worth in peace then it is unlikely that it will be valued or protected in situations of violent conflict. For instance, it has been reported that a 19-year-old Iraqi with Down’s syndrome was befriended by a group of men who strapped him with explosives and sent him to a voting station where he was detonated (Watson and Griffith 2009, 91), displaying a blatant disregard for his right to life. There are other unconfirmed reports of a wider policy of using people with Down’s syndrome in Iraq as suicide bombers (Quarmby 2008).

**Direct impacts of violent conflict**

More common than deliberate targeting is death or injury through the direct impact of the violence on the population. Mobility challenges and communication problems may result in persons with prior disabilities not knowing about the risks and finding it harder to flee violence, therefore increasing the likelihood of their being killed or injured (Masakhwe 2004; Hastie 1997, 19).

As a result, people with intellectual disabilities may be disproportionately at risk of death and injury in violent conflict situations. Many continue to be cared for by their families or in institutions, and the impact of conflict may damage their support networks and leave them more susceptible to risk (Barriga et al. 2010, 6). For example, persons with disabilities in the former Yugoslavia living in care homes were abandoned by staff unable to evacuate them quickly as the front approached (von Bertele 2011). Perhaps the greatest risks to people with intellectual disabilities come as a result of them not understanding what is occurring or their difficulties in making themselves understood, especially as their disabilities are not necessarily visible. For example, parents of children with intellectual disabilities in Kenya during the political violence in 2008 had to unwillingly confine their children indoors as they ‘didn’t understand what was going on and always wanted to go where the sounds of gunshots were coming from’ (Burugu 2008, 7). When combined with ignorance as to the nature of their impairments from those in positions of authority, this can lead to their deaths – as occurred in Israel where people with intellectual disabilities were shot dead because they did not understand what was occurring and thus did not obey soldiers’ orders (Grove, Grove, and Myerscough 2010, 89), or in Kenya where a man with Down’s syndrome was stoned to death when he was unable to express himself while being questioned (Burugu 2008, 6).

**Indirect impacts of violent conflict**

Violent conflict also disrupts and destroys services and daily life, which can lead to increased instances of impairments and disability, as well as causing deterioration in the quality of life of those disabled prior to the conflict. The disruption or destruction to basic services means that persons with disabilities and their families may face even greater problems accessing services. Where the nature of their impairments requires medical attention, the impact of violent conflict on health
services can mean that these medical needs are not met and their condition deteriorates. Rehabilitation services that might be in place can also be disrupted by the conflict. The indirect impacts of violent conflict tend to lead to increased isolation of persons with disabilities. For example, disruption to school services mean that those who were able to attend are left trapped in their homes more than before (Burugu 2008, 5).

Additionally, as a result of the strain that conflict puts on the daily lives of people and the basic services provided by the state, unless there is a change in attitudes and advocacy on their part and their behalf, persons with disabilities, especially with intellectual disabilities, who are not valued before the conflict, tend to be amongst those who lose out because they are often perceived as an even greater burden in conflict (Harknett 2002, 4). This is despite the fact that they have aided in times of conflict, such as for the US war effort during the Second World War as members of the armed forces or workers in war plants (Grove, Grove, and Myerscough 2010, 90–91).

Flight and refuge

When the violence of the conflict becomes too great or the disruption to daily life unbearable, people may flee. For families with disabled members this may sometimes lead to difficult decisions to leave them behind due to the difficulties in moving them or complex decisions about which children are most likely to survive, or in some cases what the family needs more. This led a father to choose to take the family’s cow rather than their disabled daughter (Harknett 2002, 5) and is ‘frequently the case for people with [intellectual disabilities]’ (Harris 2003, 21). Unfortunately no one really knows what happens to these persons with disabilities who have been left behind because humanitarian relief efforts are geared towards providing aid in camps far from those left behind. However, a Human Rights Watch report from Uganda stated that ‘those who could not [flee] often faced violence’ (Barriga et al. 2010, 24).

However, many families go to great lengths to flee with their disabled family members (Pinnock and Hodgkin 2010, 34). They face greater protection risks as their flight tends to take on average almost twice as long (Kett and Trani 2010, 12), leaving them more exposed to the risk of being attacked, murdered and sexually assaulted along the way. During flight, assistive aids may be lost or left behind, restricting the independence of persons with disability (Shivji 2010, 5).

Upon arrival in the camps, persons with disabilities and their families are at risk of discrimination, stigmatisation, harassment, neglect, exclusion, isolation, marginalisation, and increased dependency, as well as facing problems accessing services (Pantazopoules 2008; Adbi and Matthews 2009). Often they are not registered, not included, forgotten and ignored, resulting in them becoming hidden and neglected in the refugee population, with people with intellectual disabilities being most invisible and neglected of all (WRC 2008, 2). For example, at the recent conference on ‘Disability in Conflicts and Emergencies’ an urgent request for information about mental health services for people with intellectual disabilities was met with silence (V. Scherrer, CBM, and S. Cordier, Action on Disability and Development, personal communication, 2011). The design of camps and the way in which people with disabilities are dealt with can heighten their disability and their potential is rarely recognised (Shivji 2010, 4; Reilly 2010, 8). Reports from Nepal also suggest protection issues for women with intellectual disabilities as they are especially
affected by trafficking (WRC 2008, 33). Alternatively, there are instances where they may actually be able to access better services than they were able to in their places of origin; for example, inclusive education has been relatively successful in refugee camps (WRC 2008; Wallis 2002, 4).

Post-conflict: recovery and reconstruction

The end of the conflict brings its own problems and opportunities for persons with disabilities. For instance, relocation to a new neighbourhood raises fresh fears of stigmatisation and discrimination (Burugu 2008, 5), while persons with disabilities who have made it to refugee camps are often the last to leave because the provisions do not exist for their return and resettlement (Barriga et al. 2010, 26). Additionally, in some cases they are abandoned in the camps by their relatives (Eriku 2009; Sarr and Dube 2010, 7).

Unless changes are made and barriers eliminated, society remains disabling. In the recovery stage, support can decrease as, for example, ‘[o]verwhelmed by emergency issues, the Iraqi government has relegated [people with disabilities] to a low priority’ (Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development et al. 2010, 15).

Unless there is increased awareness through advocacy, awareness-raising, and pressure from civil society, international non-governmental organisations, and donors for change and greater inclusiveness, it is unlikely that they will be considered. A common way that disability issues become prioritised post-conflict is through attention to injured war veterans perceived of as heroes, as in Palestine (Canawati 2010, 1). While this may bring disability to prominence, it can mean the focus is solely on the disabilities of veterans (Hastie 2011). People who were born disabled or were disabled prior to the conflict are still seen in a negative light and people with intellectual disabilities remain the lowest priority (Balfour-Poole 2011). Disabled veterans’ disabled peoples’ organisations may distance themselves from people who were disabled prior to the war as they are still perceived in a negative light (Closs 2003, 159; Hastie 2011). It is not only veterans who may receive more understanding but people who have become disabled by the war in general (Moreira 2011, 101). For example, after the war in Mozambique there was greater understanding for children disabled by the war than those disabled prior to it, who were still not really accepted (Miles 2011). As people with intellectual disabilities tend to be disabled prior to conflict, they do not necessarily face greater acceptance in the post-conflict context unless there are changes to the attitude towards persons with disabilities in general and not just to those disabled by war.

Capacities

However, despite being amongst the most vulnerable and invisible of all those affected by conflict, people with intellectual disabilities should not be thought to be helpless. For example, they contributed to the US war effort during the Second World War (Grove, Grove, and Myerscough 2010, 90–91). Given the opportunities that can emerge from the changes that conflict brings, the vulnerability and invisibility of persons with intellectual disabilities could be reduced and they could meet their full potential and be more resilient in the face of any new crisis. Support towards encouraging greater advocacy, especially self-advocacy, is beneficial as it is a means of creating greater awareness, changing attitudes and strengthening the
confidence of people with intellectual disabilities. This can lead to greater societal inclusion, the creation and implementation of supportive policies, and a stronger disabled peoples’ organisation movement who can be very helpful in advising and assisting in emergency situations.

**A heterogeneous group: diversity within disability**

It is important to remember, then, that ‘persons with disabilities are a heterogeneous group of individuals, with different disabilities, genders and impairments and thus different needs and experiences’ (Eds. JofDID 2011, 3). This is very important because as well as the need to consider persons with disabilities as part of the general population with the same basic needs, there are a number of specific needs that need to be considered as part of meeting those basic needs (Scherrer and Mendis 2010, 40). A solution for one person with a disability is not necessarily going to be appropriate for someone else with a different disability, due to other factors such as age, gender, ethnic group, social status and impairment. Even amongst people classified with intellectual disabilities it is important to remember that there are differences within intellectual disabilities, including as a result of experience, and spectrums of severity within these differences, which will impact on their individual needs and capacity.

Owing to the different nature of their impairments and how they received them, persons with disabilities experience conflict in different ways. People with intellectual disabilities are at greater risk in situations of conflict (Bambi 2010, 15), yet they tend to be ignored and are one of the most invisible elements of the population due to the very factors that make them more vulnerable, such as issues with understanding the situation and making themselves understood, in a society that often is ignorant about the nature of their impairments and negative towards them. Yet, as Frost (2003, viii) points out: ‘invisibility can be lethal in situations of armed conflict’. It is therefore extremely important that attention is paid to people with intellectual disabilities and their individual and basic needs are addressed so that the vicious cycle of vulnerability and invisibility does not continue.

**Humanitarian assistance**

The paucity of data on the experiences of people with intellectual disabilities has consequences for the way in which they are addressed by humanitarian actors (IDDC Task Group n.d., 5). In humanitarian emergencies, the needs of people with intellectual disabilities arise from the general conflict context and the impact this has on the lives of *all*, and include basic human needs such as security, food, water and shelter that are threatened by violent conflict and upheaval. As part of the general population, people with intellectual disabilities should theoretically have their needs addressed. However, the disabling impact of society before, during and after violent conflict, which makes them particularly vulnerable to its negative impacts, means their needs may not be met by humanitarian assistance if it fails to recognise this variance.

**Humanitarian policies and guidelines**

The acknowledgement that persons with disabilities have the same basic needs as others, yet face challenges in having these and any additional needs met, has led
humanitarian organisations who serve the population in general to develop policies or guidelines to include disabled persons (Kett, Stubbs, and Yeo 2005, 7). For example, Oxfam has published a training manual that aimed to make ‘Disability Equality’ an everyday reality of humanitarian work so that it will ‘lead to greater inclusion, equality, and rights for disabled people’ (Harris 2003, 28). It acknowledges that ‘people with [intellectual disabilities] are known to be particularly exposed to risk’ and that a lack of understanding of their needs leads to such needs being overlooked (Harris 2003, 21–22). In addition, a number of international non-governmental organisations with a specific disability focus work in emergency situations, including Handicap International, CBM, and Action on Disability and Development.

**UNCRPD – Article 11 and the Sphere Standards**

In recognition of the great need to consider people with disabilities in situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies, the new UNCRPD has a specific article addressing this. Article 11 states that:

> States Parties shall take, in accordance with their obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law and international human rights law, all necessary measures to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk, including situations of armed conflict, humanitarian emergencies and the occurrence of natural disasters. (UNCRPD 2006)

When combined with the rest of the document, Article 11 is a ‘powerful tool to ensure that people with disabilities are included in all aspects of humanitarian response and displacement, from recovery to rebuilding and resettlement’ (Phillips, Estey, and Ennis 2010, 23). However, it is not clear what measures should be taken, and the existence of laws does not in itself guarantee protection.

Another important tool is the Sphere Project, which sets minimum standards in core areas of humanitarian assistance. Increasing awareness has resulted in a more nuanced assessment of vulnerability and disability in the newest edition of the Sphere Standards. It acknowledges that the disabling impacts of society with its physical, attitudinal and institutional barriers ‘prevent persons with disabilities from fully and meaningfully participating in, or benefiting from, mainstream humanitarian assistance programmes’ (The Sphere Project 2011, 16) and highlights the differences amongst people with disabilities, which mean that humanitarian responses must ‘take into consideration the particular abilities, skills, resources and knowledge of individuals with different types and degrees of impairments’ (2011, 17). All these are important steps forward in recognising the diversity of experience amongst people with disabilities and the need to consider their individual needs at the same time as recognising their presence in the general population and the need to address them as part of it. The recognition of diversity of experience is extremely important for people with intellectual disabilities as they face their own specific challenges amongst those faced by persons with disabilities and the general population.

**Issues with policies and guidelines**

However, despite the increasing number of policies and guidelines amongst humanitarian agencies relating to disability in emergencies, alongside the positive move
forward in relation to the use of the language of inclusion and the social model (Kett, Stubbs, and Yeo 2005), there continue to be issues with the policies and guidelines that exist.

The diversity of disability is not always recognised and the specific needs of people with intellectual disabilities are not raised, which may lead to a tendency for disability awareness to lead to a consideration only of the needs of those with physical disabilities, for example, as they are most visible or ‘easiest’ to assist, with people with intellectual disabilities neglected due to a lack of awareness. At a 2011 conference in London entitled ‘Mainstreaming Disability into Humanitarian Assistance: How Far Have We Come?’, the focus of the speakers was on those physically impaired by crisis, with an acknowledgement that those who had been disabled prior to the emergency were not often considered a priority (Skelton 2011), although their vulnerabilities and the disabling impact of society left them at risk. As many intellectual disabilities are congenital rather than acquired, this puts them at a disadvantage and they were acknowledged to be the lowest priority of all (P. Skelton, personal communication, 24 June 2011).

The issue may be that intellectual disabilities are hard to diagnose, understand and support, and thus do not fit easily into a standard package (D. Hulme, personal email correspondence, 2011). Thus, people with intellectual disabilities are ill-served in a lot of policy as the amalgamation of persons with disabilities in general obscures them and their specific needs (Lecomte and Mercier 2009, 44).

Implementation and practice

It is possible to find some excellent examples of forward thinking and good practice in humanitarian assistance provision for people with disabilities, including projects that include people with intellectual disabilities. Hastie (1997) describes an Oxfam project in Bosnia-i-Herzegovina during the war that provided a centre for children with disabilities, a support service for their parents and carers, and cooperation with a local disability group that produced disability aids for the children in the centre. In a Bhutanese refugee camp in Nepal, a training course for mothers of children with intellectual disabilities and cerebral palsy set up by Caritas to develop their self-confidence, self-esteem and skills to look after their children, has helped make them feel less isolated and led to the formation of a mothers’ support group (WRC 2008, 22).

However, ‘there are still large gaps between policy, guidance and implementation’ (Kett and Twigg 2007, 94). For example, while United Nations agencies such as UNHCR and UNICEF include the new UNCRPD’s principles in their operations and it is possible to find examples of their work with people with disabilities in violent contexts (Townsend 2008), until recently UNICEF was still only developing its policy on disability within its Humanitarian Policy Section (G. Wolfensohn, G. de Gaudenzi, N. Brandt, personal communication, June 2011). The problem is that without a clear and consistent policy on disability throughout any organisation, the result is inconsistency in practice.

In addition, despite changing attitudes, moves to inclusion, and the greater adoption of the social model, an increased consideration of disability in humanitarian action has tended to focus on people with physical and, to a slightly lesser extent, sensory impairments, with little attention paid to people with intellectual disabilities. The focus on those injured by the crisis has also been to the detriment of people with intellectual disabilities. None of the major disability specialist organisations
working in humanitarian crises focuses on them, while there is a tendency for other humanitarian organisations to pass persons with disabilities they encounter on to these disability specialist organisations (alluded to in interviews with Balfour-Poole and Hastie), leaving people with intellectual disabilities to fall through the cracks. Assuming that disability is covered by focusing on those who become physically disabled as a result of conflict is to the detriment of people with intellectual disabilities, whose needs, while similar in some respects, differ in others. The fact that theirs is often not a visible disability could be an additional factor in the lack of consideration for them.

**Restrictive attitudes**

Humanitarian workers and the donors and policy-makers who influence their work are not necessarily removed from the disabling attitudes in society (Hastie 1997, 63). There continue to be a number of restrictive attitudes within humanitarian organisations that lead to the lack of inclusion of persons with disabilities in their programmes, including misinformed ideas about the costs of such programmes, the lack of substantial numbers, the feeling that ‘normal’ people are the priority, and the worry that specialist skills are needed or the belief that specialist programmes will meet all the needs of disabled people (Harris 2003, 29–32). This denies the fundamental normality of disability within society and the numbers affected, especially when families are factored in; the relatively low costs of accessibility, which benefits wider society too; the fact that anyone can work with disabled people; and that special programmes cannot meet all the needs of disabled people. A twin-track approach of mainstreaming combined with specialist programmes appears the most effective approach to meeting all the needs of persons with disabilities (DFID 2000).

**‘Coming last’**

Lack of consideration in humanitarian assistance fails to challenge the marginalisation, discrimination and disabling barriers that serve to heighten susceptibility to risk of people with intellectual disabilities and denies their capabilities. Even within disabled peoples’ organisations, whose advocacy and partnerships with humanitarian agencies have proved to be very important in including disability issues in humanitarian assistance, there is a lack of representation of people with intellectual disabilities (Hulme 2011). This becomes a problem when humanitarian agencies assume that disabled people’s needs are homogeneous and do not consult with people with intellectual disabilities and their families, thereby missing out on their specific needs.

Disability is diverse and one group does not speak for all, even when many of the same barriers are faced. Adopting a broad and flexible attitude to disability would ensure that nobody is left out (Kett and Twigg 2007, 98). Furthermore conflict brings with it a significant potential for change, as it destroys old systems and can bring in new ideas and funds, which offers the opportunity to change attitudes and remove disabling barriers (V. Scherrer, CBM, personal communication, 2011; Hastie 1997), creating greater resilience amongst persons with disabilities.

**Conclusion**

While people with intellectual disabilities would benefit from more evidence of their experiences being gathered, the evidence available shows that they have had to
cope with disproportionately negative experiences of conflict. The ‘assumption that support for general populations will automatically benefit disabled people is false: disabled people do not have equal access to resources and opportunities’ (Harris 2003, 49). Considering their needs and capacities, through inclusiveness and mainstreaming, would create ‘a higher quality society for everyone, not just disabled people; as society that embraces diversity and promotes community solidarity, enables people’s potential and protects those who are vulnerable’ (European Disability Forum 2002, 17). It is undeniable that people with intellectual disabilities have important differences but these should not be seen to be due to the ‘deficient nature of the individuals concerned’ (Ryan 1987, 29). Recognition of the inherent equal worth and dignity of each human being, despite their differences, would result in their inclusion in humanitarian assistance. Having forgotten for so long about the plight of people with intellectual disabilities in conflict, it is important to start finally paying attention.

Acknowledgements
This article draws on research conducted for a master’s dissertation (available on AskSource). The author would like to thank Susie Miles, Rebecca Shea, Charlotte-Balfour-Poole and Rachel Hastie for the information they provided and the support they gave in writing my dissertation.

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