Older people & disasters

The Caribbean has the fastest ageing population in the developing world. The United Nations estimates that the over-age-60 population in the Caribbean will increase from 11.1% of the population in 2005 to 24.6% in 2050. The progressive loss of function in the older years leads to a reduction in the ability to adapt to life’s challenges and to cope with disruptions in daily routine, such as occurs during disasters. These changing demographics of ageing combined with the increasing number of disasters will exert a disproportionate impact on the world’s oldest and poorest.

One important strategy to reduce this impact is the mainstreaming of ageing considerations into all developmental policies and programmes, including disaster management programmes and processes, using a participatory approach, to ensure that older persons have a voice. Key actions:

1. Accommodation/inclusion – ensuring that policies, strategies and activities take into account the needs, capacities, specific vulnerabilities, and perspectives of all ages;
2. Education – increasing awareness and knowledge of disasters and how older persons experiences and responds to them (the ‘what about’ and ‘what to do’ at different phases of a disaster), as well as specific training tailored to meeting the needs of older persons.
3. Communication – providing timely, accurate, practical information which can be understood;
4. Coordination – ensuring complementary multi-sectoral action

Key facts

Older persons are a very diverse group and are not all equally vulnerable to hazards.

Advanced age by itself does not equal vulnerability. Problems, more common in old age, are what increases vulnerability. It is deteriorating physical ability, decreased strength, poor physical activity tolerance, functional limitations and decreased sensory awareness that contribute to increasing vulnerability.

The degree and severity to which older persons are affected in emergencies/disasters depends on the specific characteristics of the persons and their environment, the type
and severity of the hazard, the disaster management systems and the interactions between the three.

A large segment of the over-age-60 population (approximately 20-30%) has one or more disability, whether physical, mental or sensory. This percentage increases by each five year age group, to more than 50% in the over-age-80 group.

Surveys in the region suggest that at least 60% of older persons have at least one or more chronic diseases. Well-controlled chronic medical conditions and diseases can rapidly deteriorate during disasters, leading to complications and even precipitating death.

Limitations in senses of vision and hearing are particularly significant for coping in disasters. 35% of older people in selected Latin America and the Caribbean cities report having some form of visual impairment.

Mental health problems are common in old age and preexisting mental health problems can make the disruptions associated with disasters seem much worse and lead to feelings of helplessness and poor responsiveness.

Ageing also causes limitations in movement. Limited mobility increases vulnerability in two ways. Firstly, decreased mobility makes it harder for an older person to maintain their housing and prepare for a potential disaster such as a hurricane and secondly, in the event of a disaster, decreased mobility can make it harder for older people to evacuate their environment and protect themselves. 20% of older people living in the community have reported limitations in their ability to perform at least one activity of daily living such as bathing, eating, dressing, toileting, transferring and walking (ECLAC, 2008, MERCK & PAHO, 2004).

The World Development Report (WDR) 2007 reports that healthcare provided in the aftermath of a disaster may not be appropriate for the medical needs of older people, for example, the need for eye clinics, physiotherapy, mobility aids and specific medication. In addition, public services may be unavailable due to many reasons including blocked roads.

House ownership is high among older persons but safe adequate housing is not always available, especially in rural areas. Houses tend to be older and poorly maintained - because of inability to effect repairs- and therefore more vulnerable to hazards.

Studies in Caribbean reveal that most shelters do not cater to the needs and conditions of older persons, lacking for example, privacy, appropriate bedding - in terms of height and size of cots, access for the disabled, and most times having high noise levels and poor security.

In general, older persons are not taken into consideration into disaster planning, and their special health needs are usually not adequately addressed in disaster situations.

Older persons can make positive contributions during times of crisis.

Surveys in the region report that approximately 80% of older people are functionally independent even despite having a disability. (ECLAC, 2007; 2008)

Links


