

Emergencies and ageing

A position paper

March 2001

HelpAge International is a global network of not-for-profit organisations with a mission to work with and for disadvantaged older people worldwide to achieve a lasting improvement in the quality of their lives.

Its secretariat consists of an office in London, regional centres in Bolivia, Jamaica, Thailand and Kenya and eight country offices. The secretariat oversees strategy, ensures accountability and supports member organisations and partners through training, advice on fundraising, organisational development and management support, project development assistance and finance.

Emergencies and ageing: a position paper

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Introduction

Older poor people are at high levels of risk in the world's increasing number of conflicts and natural disasters, but are not as yet systematically identified and catered for as a vulnerable group. HelpAge International believes that their rights, needs and capabilities must be recognised in all emergency and disaster-preparedness programmes. We work to ensure their full and equal access to mainstream relief services and to longer-term help with rebuilding their lives and livelihoods and those of their families and communities. This paper summarises our position.

The context

Growing pressures

In recent years, there has been an explosion of ethnic and civil conflicts, coupled with a sharp increase in numbers of people fleeing environmental disasters such as floods, mudslides and cyclones. Pressures on international aid organisations to provide funding and humanitarian assistance have grown correspondingly.

As the number of complex humanitarian emergencies – civilian crises caused by political and ethnic strife, compounded by intense poverty – has risen, so has the proportion of official development assistance spent on emergency relief in conflict situations. Since 1990, some five million people in the states of the former Yugoslavia, hundreds of thousands of Somalis, more than two million people in southern Sudan and over one million in East Timor have had their lives disrupted or directly threatened. Worldwide, there has been a significant rise in numbers of refugees and internally displaced people.

There is mounting evidence of a trend towards more weather-related super-disasters, such as the cyclone which struck the Indian state of Orissa in 1999 and the floods and mudslides in northern Venezuela in the same year. Between 1993 and 1999, the number of people receiving relief as a result of natural catastrophes climbed from under half a million to over five and half million.

Both in complex humanitarian emergencies and in natural disasters, the linked problems of poverty, population pressures and environmental degradation substantially increase levels of vulnerability, intensifying impacts, and delaying recovery and reconstruction. In all emergencies, the poor and vulnerable suffer most and longest – among them, significant numbers of older people, who now make up between 10 and 30 per cent of refugees in conflict situations.

Making the links between relief and development

In the past, emergency relief was seen as a separate intervention, unrelated to development activities. Aid agencies and governments focused on rapid and efficient distribution of medical and material aid, and paid little attention to longer-term issues, which in rural areas can include a complete loss of livelihoods and the resources needed to sustain them.

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There has been a growing realisation that emergency aid must, as much as possible, integrate its aims and approaches with those of development work. Without an understanding of the ways in which development can and does occur in the midst of conflict, for example, non-government organisations (NGOs) can miss important opportunities to strengthen communities' resilience in the longer term.

Over the past two decades, the global spend on disaster relief has increased in the context of an overall decline in levels of development aid. The proportion of the United Nations' development assistance budget given to relief and emergency rose from 25 to 45 per cent. For this reason, it is vital that NGOs and governments tackle the longer-term social and economic dimensions of disasters more systematically, and use the resources spent on emergency aid to mitigate against future crises.

HelpAge International believes that, as a development-oriented organisation, we must take into account the risks that our programmes with and for older people face when disasters strike. Increasingly, when planning development programmes, we aim to incorporate disaster-mitigation and preparedness measures, particularly in high-risk regions.

An integrated approach to disaster management

The disaster management cycle is made up of four, equally important stages. The most visible stage is recovery, which covers all actions to restore disaster-affected communities. It includes the relief and rehabilitation efforts which seek to meet immediate needs and then restore basic services.

The reconstruction stage which follows aims to rebuild people's lives in the months following the disaster, and can offer important opportunities to introduce new forms of community organisation and to reduce vulnerability to hazards.

The preparedness and mitigation stages of the cycle focus on actions to modify unsafe conditions and levels of human vulnerability, rather than to address hazards directly. They are less visible and harder to fund, but a critical part of any strategy for effective long-term management of disasters.

Preparedness in hazard-prone areas can significantly reduce loss of life and property. It includes predicting, responding to and coping with the immediate effects of a disaster through planning and preparation, and setting up orderly systems (such as training in evacuation) to operate in emergencies. Mitigation consists of longer-term, larger-scale policy work to prevent or diminish disaster impacts. It includes physical mitigation (such as strengthening unsafe buildings); non-structural mitigation (such as providing grants to grassroots groups engaged in conservation or water provision); and agricultural mitigation (such as providing drought- or flood-resistant seeds).

Preparedness and mitigation are the key to rapid identification of frail or isolated older people during an emergency, reducing its impacts on them, and supporting their rapid recovery afterwards. They are strategies which can be implemented at any point in the cycle: before a disaster, during it, or as part of reconstruction.

Most aid organisations enter the cycle only when disaster has struck, and neglect preparedness and mitigation. Yet these measures constitute the single most important investment which could, in the longer term, significantly reduce loss of life and reduce overall costs.

HelpAge International believes that older people's welfare in emergencies and disasters is critically dependent on the adoption of an integrated, long-term approach to disaster management by relief agencies.

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We act as an intermediary body offering advice to other agencies and other groups to help them work effectively with older people in emergencies.

How we work

Our mandate

HelpAge International is a global network of not-for-profit organisations which works with and for disadvantaged older people to achieve lasting improvements in the quality of their lives.

With over fifteen years' experience of work in disasters and complex emergencies, we support older people, their immediate carers and their families to escape life-threatening situations by providing relief assistance and rehabilitation, and by supporting capacity-building and preparedness activities.

We act as an intermediary body offering advice to other agencies and other groups to help them work effectively with older people in emergencies. For example, we have developed practical guidelines to ensure that older people's rights and needs are recognised in emergencies.

We also work through our own network of regional centres, country offices, member organisations and partners, and are at present implementing operational programmes in a number of countries facing conflict or post-emergency situations, including the Sudan, Mozambique, Rwanda, India and the Balkans.

We operate to internationally agreed standards. We are a signatory to the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement for NGOs in Disaster Relief Code of Conduct (1994) which states that humanitarian assistance in conflicts and disasters is a fundamental human right for all people.

We are also members of the Sphere Project (1996), launched by non-government organisations as the first collaborative initiative to produce globally applicable minimum standards for humanitarian response in areas such as nutrition, sanitation, and health services.

Our approach

Every year, disasters and conflicts affect millions, among them the world's increasing numbers of older people. There are now some 53 million refugees or internally displaced people, and nine in ten casualties in conflicts are civilians.

Disasters exacerbate and intensify the effects of poverty and social exclusion, the greatest threats faced by older people. Many older people describe themselves as experiencing a crisis of invisibility, exclusion and powerlessness even before disaster strikes. One of HelpAge International's core aims in emergency and disaster-preparedness programmes is to minimise poor older people's vulnerability, by building resilience and improving overall livelihood security.

We recognise that in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, opportunities to conduct longer-term risk-reduction and reconstruction activities with older people may be limited. But emergency assistance can lay the foundations upon which sustainable development and risk-reduction can be built.

As one of the few international organisations that focus on older people, we aim to ensure that older people's rights and needs are fully recognised in the growing amount of aid now spent on disaster relief. We feed into relief efforts a clearer understanding of older people's lives, experiences and needs in non-emergency situations.

Our main activities are:

- **Humanitarian relief** We target the most vulnerable older people and their immediate carers, dependants and families. We aim to make maximum use of local knowledge and human resources, and to integrate our activities into local systems and structures as soon as possible.
- **Reconstruction and rehabilitation** We work through local organisations to rebuild social and economic structures, build capacity and strengthen civil society.
- **Disaster management and mitigation** We help communities prepare themselves for disasters through, for example, emergency committees, education and training. We stress that older people's poverty and insecurity lie at the heart of their vulnerability in emergencies.
- **Capacity building** We work to increase knowledge of older people's situation in emergencies and improve response across the HelpAge International network.
- **Networking** We build partnerships with NGOs involved in supporting older people in emergencies, to increase co-ordination and disseminate expertise and knowledge.
- **Advocacy** We press for the recognition and realisation of older people's rights in emergencies at local, national and international levels, through, for example:
 - working to establish a legal identity for older ethnic minorities such as Serbs in Kosovo
 - ensuring older people have equal access to services in emergencies through, for example, fast-track food queues or setting up older people's committees to help target distributions
 - lobbying the United Nations, European Union, donors and international relief agencies to identify and provide for older people as a group with special needs in emergency and post-emergency situations
 - publishing practical guidelines and checklists for relief agencies working with older people in emergencies.

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Older people and emergencies

Getting a clearer picture

Humanitarian agencies' stated aim is to prioritise the most vulnerable in emergencies, but many lack the systems and structures needed to identify and support older people as a specific vulnerable group. There is also a widespread tendency to under-estimate the role older people's skills and knowledge can play in rehabilitation and reconstruction strategies.

In 1999, HelpAge International completed a groundbreaking study of older people's experiences of emergencies in Asia, the Caribbean, Africa and Europe, with funding from the European Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO) and the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). We found that older people's basic needs were typically overlooked and that they experienced many barriers to accessing support and services. The physical aspects of ageing have a direct impact on the nature of the support that older people need and their abilities to access resources available.

The study highlighted that the key to understanding the position of older people, especially those who are poor, is to appreciate that the chronic problems they face prior to a disaster will become acute once the limited support that they enjoyed has broken down or been destroyed.

It also showed clearly that helping older people survive and cope with disasters is not about creating special services – but about ensuring equal access to mainstream services at all stages of a relief effort. This means locating and identifying older people at the outset; assessing needs and levels of support through direct consultation; and tailoring services and delivery systems to take account of factors like poor mobility, special nutritional needs, or chronic health conditions.

The research findings, along with other lessons from our experience, were published as *Older people in disasters and humanitarian crises: guidelines for best practice*. The report argues that older people should be actively involved in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of basic needs in emergency situations. It has been widely adopted and used by relief agencies.

Understanding older people's contributions

Our research showed that, far from being passive dependants, older people make substantial contributions to community welfare in emergencies. Many care for children or disabled family members in the absence of other able-bodied adults, and can help target relief to those most in need. In many instances they are givers rather than receivers, passing on what they have to other family members.

Older people know how their communities have prepared for and coped with disasters in the past, and have the knowledge and skills needed to help recovery in future disasters. The sense of history and continuity that older people bring can play an important role in preserving the social identity of communities in crisis. This is especially important in artificial communities such as refugee camps where camp culture can rapidly replace traditional cultural identities.

During and after disasters, older people, in particular older women, can take on additional responsibilities and acquire new skills, in the household and community. They face, and often overcome, preconceived ideas about their limitations.

We found a significant mismatch between older people's most pressing concern in an emergency – the long-term threat posed to their families, livelihoods and homes – and relief agencies' assumption that their primary focus would be their own short-term, personal needs.

Key factors affecting older people

Older people in disasters and humanitarian crises highlights some key areas for consideration by relief agencies. Critical factors affecting older people's welfare in and after emergencies are:

- **Mobility** As communities flee, many older people, particularly the housebound, can be left behind without support. Many choose to stay, fearing a long journey or death in a foreign country, and are then extremely vulnerable during periods of violence. In the physical chaos associated with the early stages of an emergency, older people may be unable to struggle for food and resources, travel long distances or endure even relatively short periods without shelter. Older people need to be identified and their situations assessed as early as possible in an emergency situation.
- **Health** Most NGOs emphasise primary healthcare programmes targeting children and women, and neglect older people. Emergency food and nutrition programmes are seldom adjusted to their needs – for example, hard grains can be inedible because of dental or other health problems – and there is a tendency to see supplementary food programmes for older people as a waste. Reduced mobility, combined with distances to centralised health systems and water-points, can create significant barriers to older people's access to health services. Considering older people's specific health needs is critical to emergency planning.
- **Livelihoods** When communities return home, older people typically face difficulties in accessing land and other scarce resources. Exclusion from credit, income-generation and food-for-work programmes is common, and exacerbates their loss of independence, status and dignity. Rehabilitation and reconstruction programmes need to ensure older people have full and equal support in re-building their livelihoods.

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■ **Psychological and social impacts** The feelings of loss, trauma, confusion and fear familiar to all people in emergencies can be more damaging for older people. In regions hit by frequent disasters, famine or conflict, they may have suffered repeated personal loss, physical displacement and dislocation of social structures. They may need special support to recover emotionally and find new roles.

■ **Isolation** For older people in emergencies, isolation sharply increases levels of risk. Loss of family, carers and community ties can leave older people without support mechanisms, and abandonment, discrimination and self-exclusion are not uncommon. Socially or physically isolated older people need identification and targeted support.

■ **Perceptions** Chronic health, mobility and mental-health problems are not seen as a priority by aid agencies in most emergencies. But these are exactly the factors that heighten vulnerability and make it difficult for older people to support themselves and contribute to the overall relief effort.

■ **Gender** Older women tend to be more numerous in refugee populations, but age and gender barriers are more likely to exclude them from decision-making and resources than older men. Social and religious restrictions on women's movement, speech and public exposure can increase their vulnerability during emergencies.

An agenda for action

Taking things forward

We are committed to working with local and national governments, international bodies, funders and relief agencies to ensure the realisation of older people's right to equitable treatment in both natural disasters and complex humanitarian emergencies, to promote a better understanding of their specific needs, wants and capabilities, and to disseminate best practice. We will:

- **Seek to use emergencies as a vehicle for change** Disasters can act as a catalyst for change, and heighten political awareness of the need for preventive action. We will seek to use disasters to highlight older people's underlying vulnerabilities, to build local capacity, and to secure resources and decisions which address those vulnerabilities.
- **Advocate for older people's needs and contributions** We will raise awareness of the specific needs of older people as a vulnerable group in emergencies, and of their economic and social roles and contributions during and after a disaster. We will continue to foster best practice among relief agencies.
- **Work for equitable funding** Funds allocated to emergency relief, rehabilitation and recovery programmes have grown steadily as a proportion of development aid. We are committed to ensuring these funds are used as effectively as possible to support older people at all stages of the disaster management cycle.
- **Foster the links between emergency and development** We will further integrate our own emergencies and development programmes, with an emphasis on reducing older people's poverty and building their livelihoods, and press for a model of emergency reconstruction which addresses the social and economic implications of disasters for older people
- **Work to rights-based standards** We will continue to respond to emergencies on the basis of a long-term, rights-based approach. We will measure our success by the degree to which the most vulnerable poor, older people are able to cope with and recover from emergencies, and the extent to which international funding builds long-term capacity and resilience in their communities.

We will continue to respond to emergencies on the basis of a long-term, rights-based approach.

Appendix

Criteria for HelpAge International's emergency response

On the basis of our mandate and mission, we seek to provide assistance to disaster and emergency management projects which meet the following criteria:

- The request for assistance to HelpAge International (HAI) comes from a member organisation, counterpart, local organisation or target group, a government organisation or the United Nations.
- There is a significant threat to basic needs, water, food, health, shelter and security, and HAI is able to direct its activities towards the most vulnerable older people, its target beneficiaries and their dependants.
- Access to the disaster area and local structures exist for the transfer of assistance and further capacity building. HAI will work with and support existing institutions, providing appropriate training for organisational strengthening and development of local organisations, HAI members and partners.
- The project contributes to the reduction of vulnerability and negative effects of any future disasters and strengthens the preparedness and early warning systems of local partner organisations.
- Wherever possible, the beneficiaries are consulted and involved in the planning and implementation of the relief response.
- Co-ordination with other development agencies is possible. HAI will seek to promote and facilitate the integration of appropriate emergency response programmes for the elderly through co-operation with other aid organisations, especially when HAI does not have its own emergency programme in a particular region.
- Preferably, communication and information sharing can be established with local authorities, community planners and policy makers.
- HAI's intervention is temporary and support is given to a sustainable hand-over of disaster programmes to local partners, and community self-management.
- HAI's neutrality is not jeopardised.

HelpAge International resources

Briefing papers

Emergencies and ageing: a position paper is one of a series of briefing papers on core issues relating to ageing produced by HelpAge International. Other titles include:

Capacity building and ageing: a position paper

Gender and ageing: a position paper

Participation and ageing: a position paper

Poverty and ageing: a position paper

The mark of a noble society: human rights and older people

Free.

Other publications

Older people in disasters and humanitarian crises: Guidelines for best practice (2000)

Based on wide-ranging new research from Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas and on 20 years' global disaster experience, these guidelines aim to help relief agencies meet the special needs of older people in emergencies. Available in English, Bangla, French, Spanish and Portuguese.

Free. Available at www.helpage.org in English and Spanish.

The Ageing and Development Report: Poverty, Independence and the World's Older People

(Editors: Judith Randel and Tony German, 1999)

A HelpAge International report on the circumstances of older people in developing countries and countries in transition, with chapters on economic security, health, family and community life, poverty, gender and emergencies; and information on demographic trends and ageing in specific countries and regions.

Price: £14.95. Available from Earthscan Tel: +44 (0)20 7278 0433. Email: earthinfo@earthscan.co.uk.

Website: www.earthscan.co.uk

The Ageing and Development Report: a summary (1999)

A summary of the full report is available in English, French and Spanish.

Free. Available at www.helpage.org in English, French and Spanish.

Regular publications

Ageways

A journal exchanging practical information on ageing and agecare issues, particularly good practice developed in the HelpAge International network. Free to carers, health workers, members of older people's groups and project staff working with or for older people in developing countries and East and Central Europe.

Published three times a year in English and Spanish (*Horizontes*). Free.

Ageing and Development

A regular briefing which aims to raise awareness of the contribution, needs and rights of older people and to promote the development of laws and policies that will bring a lasting improvement to the quality of life of disadvantaged older people. Free to policy makers, programme planners and researchers concerned with development and poverty eradication.

Published three times a year in English and Spanish (*Tercera Edad y Desarrollo*). Free.

All the above can be ordered from: Publications orders, HelpAge International, PO Box 32832, London N1 9ZN, UK. Fax: +44 (0)20 7843 1840 Email: cdobbing@helpage.org or order at www.helpage.org

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