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Older people & disasters

Although older people are a very diverse group, many are especially vulnerable to emergencies and hazards. Those with progressive loss of function in particular can have difficulty adapting to challenges and coping with disruptions. The Caribbean has the fastest-ageing population in the developing world, with people over age 60 projected to increase from 11.1% of the population in 2005 to 24.6% in 2050. This demographic change combined with a growing number of disasters creates special problems for the elderly as well as the poor.

To address these special problems, ageing issues should be taken into consideration in all development policies and programmes, including those related to disaster management, using a participatory approach to ensure that older people have a voice. Key areas of action include:

- **Accommodation/inclusion:** ensuring that policies, strategies, and activities take into account the needs, capacities, vulnerabilities, and perspectives of all ages.
- **Education:** increasing awareness and knowledge about disasters and how older people experience and respond to them. This includes specific training for health professionals working in disaster risk management and for older persons at all levels of society.
- **Communication:** providing timely, accurate, and practical information that is easy to understand.
- **Coordination:** ensuring complementary action across sectors.

Key facts:

- Advanced age by itself does not create vulnerability. However, certain problems that are more common in old age can increase vulnerability. They include decreased strength, poor tolerance of physical activity, functional limitations, and decreased sensory awareness.
- The severity of the impact of emergencies and disasters on older people depends on the specific characteristics of the elderly and their environments, the type and severity of the hazard, disaster management systems, and interactions between all of these.
- Approximately 20-30% of people over 60 have one or more disabilities, whether physical, mental, or sensory. This percentage increases with age to more than 50% in people over 80.
- Limitations in **vision** and **hearing** are particularly significant for coping in disasters. Surveys in selected Latin America and the Caribbean cities show that about 35% of older people have some form of visual impairment.

- Age-related declines in **mobility** can increase older people's vulnerability in two ways: by making it harder for them to maintain their housing and prepare for a potential disaster (such as a hurricane) and by making it harder to evacuate and protect themselves.
- Survey data show that 20% of older people living in the community report limitations in their ability to perform at least one activity of daily living, such as bathing, eating, dressing, toileting, walking, or using transportation (ECLAC 2008, MERCK & PAHO 2004). Emergencies and disasters may disrupt access to people and services the elderly rely upon in their daily lives.
- **Mental health** problems are common in old age and can make the disruptions associated with disasters seem much worse, leading to feelings of helplessness and poor ability to respond.
- Surveys in the Caribbean show that at least 60% of older people have one or more **chronic diseases**. Even if normally well controlled, chronic diseases and conditions can rapidly deteriorate during disasters, leading to complications and even death.
- Health care provided in the aftermath of a disaster may not be appropriate for older people, who have greater needs for eye clinics, physiotherapy, mobility aids, and specific medications (World Development Report 2007).
- Although **home ownership** tends to be higher among older people, not all of the elderly live in safe housing, especially in rural areas. Their houses tend to be older and less well maintained (if they are unable to effect repairs), which makes them more vulnerable to hazards.
- Studies in the Caribbean reveal that most shelters do not adequately address the needs and conditions of older people, for example, lacking privacy, appropriate bedding (in terms of height and size of cots), and access for the disabled, and often having high noise levels and poor security.
- Surveys in Latin America and the Caribbean show that 8 in 10 older people remain functionally independent despite having a disability. (ECLAC, 2007 & 2008). Older people can make positive contributions during times of crisis.

Further reading

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