Promoting Disability-Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction Initiatives

The perspective of persons with disabilities on disaster risk reduction had been long-overlooked, but the Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction (3rd UNWCDRR) was certainly a turning point in that persons with disabilities are no longer identified as “vulnerable in disaster,” but instead are positioned as one of the important individuals, contributing to the policy making of DRR. However, at the same time, the process of promoting Disability-Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction (DIDRR) for the 3rd UNWCDRR was a reminder that the current UN system limits the full and effective participation of persons with disabilities, from the preparatory process to actual UN conferences. And most importantly, as the next disaster could strike at any time, immediate action needs to be taken to implement the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction[[1]](#footnote-1).

In this article, we, the Nippon Foundation[[2]](#footnote-2), are delighted to share our experiences in promoting DIDRR at the 3rd UNWCDRR and to also introduce our current ongoing DIDRR model project as examples of implementation of the Sendai Framework.

In March 2011, we were overwhelmed by a feeling of helplessness. Nearly 16,000 people lost their lives due to the Great East Japan Earthquake, in which the mortality rate of persons with disabilities was said to be more than double that of persons without disabilities in many of the disaster-affected areas. We looked back at the past 30 years of our contributions in the field of DRR, both nationally and internationally including the UN Sasakawa Award[[3]](#footnote-3) for DRR, and regretted our lack of consideration for persons with disabilities.

It was the same when we looked at the issue from a global perspective. According to the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR), there were almost no sessions related to disabilities held in international conferences on DRR nor persons with disabilities participating in these conferences. Also, persons with disabilities were mentioned only one time in the “Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015”[[4]](#footnote-4) as one of the vulnerable groups (as we often see in many other UN outcome documents).

The Nippon Foundation was committed to promoting DIDRR at the 3rd UNWCDRR to make sure that the perspective of persons with disabilities is included in the post Hyogo Framework.

To achieve this goal, we thought it was crucial 1) to provide an accessible conference environment at the 3rd UNWCDRR, and therefore the Nippon Foundation provided UNISDR with a grant to secure barrier-free venues, accommodations, and transportation as well as access to information via sign language interpretation, real time captioning and accessible documents, and 2) to make an appeal about the importance of DIDRR to UN bodies and delegates of government officials beginning from the preparatory phase, because the drafting of UN outcome documents is done prior to the opening of the actual conferences.

Together with Japanese and international disability organizations, the Nippon Foundation attended a series of preparatory conferences for the 3rd UNWCDRR and other DRR related sessions, beginning with one held in Tokyo in 2012 and continuing in Incheon, Geneva, New York, Bangkok, and so on. However, there was a UN system blocking the initiative and it was the “Major Group”[[5]](#footnote-5) framework. The UN had mandated nine groups[[6]](#footnote-6) as the important stakeholders of civil society and they are given the privilege to participate and be provided access to information and facilities in UN conferences. Due to the Major Group framework, which has not been reviewed since 1992, it was extraordinarily difficult for a disability group to make a statement in those preparatory UN conferences.

We could not relent on this issue simply because we did not want to make the same mistakes and lose more lives when disaster strikes next. The disability organizations and the Nippon Foundation submitted a joint request to the UNISDR’s Margareta Wahlstorm, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction, to the chairman of the 3rd UNWCDRR Preparatory Committee and to H.E. Kenichi Suganuma, the Japanese government ambassador in charge of the 3rd UNWCDRR. Following this, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities also issued similar statements. As a result, the disability group was positioned as “other important stakeholders” at the 3rd UNWCDRR.

After going through a long preparatory period, the 3rd UNWCDRR was held from 14 to 18 March, 2015 in Sendai, Japan. Over 6,500 people from 187 countries representing governments, UN organizations and NGOs participated at the 3rd UNWCDRR and a total of 150,000 people took part in the hundreds of side events and exhibitions.

The main DIDRR related outcomes of the 3rd UNWCDRR were as follows:

**Active participation by persons with disabilities**

* More than 200 persons with disabilities participated
* For the first time, an official working session was held on the theme of DIDRR at a UNWCDRR
* 15 March: Mr. Adam Kosa, European Parliament was invited to speak by the Nippon Foundation at UN DESA Forum[[7]](#footnote-7) on Disability-Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction and Resilience: Inclusion Saves Lives
* 15 March: Ms. Maryanne Diamond from the International Disability Alliance participated as a panelist in the Ministerial Roundtable: International Cooperation in Support of a Post -2015 Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction
* 16 March: Mr. Monthian Buntan from the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities made a statement as the representative of persons living with disabilities at the 6th Plenary Meeting[[8]](#footnote-8)
* 17 March: Mr. Carlos Kaiser Mansilla from ONG Inclusiva participated as a panelist at the High-level Partnership Dialogue on Inclusive DRM: Governments, Communities & Group Acting together

**“Most accessible UN Conference” as non-disability thematic event**

* A barrier-free venue, accommodations and transportation were secured
* International and Japanese sign language interpretation and real time captioning in English and Japanese were provided
* Documents were provided in an accessible format
* Margareta Wahlstorm of the UNISDR recalled that “this conference was one of, if not the most accessible UN conference… a new standard for accessibility has been set” at the Closure of the conference[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Adoption of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 as the post Hyogo Framework**

* Disability is mentioned 5 times and it specifies that “in order to be efficient and effective… governments should engage with women, children and youth, persons with disabilities… in the design and implementation of policies, plans and standards of initiatives to reduce disaster risk.”
* Universal “design” and “access” and “providing psychological support and mental health services” are also highlighted

As we have seen, the achievements at the 3rd UNWCDRR was a crucial first step toward mainstreaming disabilities in the DRR field as well as DRR in the disabilities field. However, promotion of DIDRR initiatives should not end with the adoption of the Sendai Framework; rather, the time has come to take action on DIDRR.

DIDRR is often misconstrued to be especially for persons with disabilities. However, as

DIDRR plans require the full and effective participation of local community members, DIDRR is the key to bring everyone in a community together to create a community where each of them can feel safe and attached to the community. The true purpose of DIDRR is to look at DDR from the point of view of persons with disabilities in order to achieve city planning for everyone. For example, as Japan’s population is aging, creating a barrier free evacuation route and shelters would also benefit those elderly people. Also, of those victims who flee to evacuation shelters, the ones who will remain there until the very end are the poor and needy, including foreigners, the elderly and other people who are often left out of disaster prevention planning. Issues which stay hidden in normal times will come to light in a crisis, and what awaits people after such disasters is poverty.

Therefore, with the model project which started in April, 2016 in Beppu City, Oita Prefecture in southern Japan, we started by launching a committee to strengthen cooperation among multiple stakeholders including persons with disabilities, local authorities, academics, lawyers, the media in order to generate a collective impact. We also made sure that multiple sectors of the Beppu City hall, such as the disability welfare division and crisis management division, were all involved in the committee.

“Saving lives” is considered to be the most important point of the model project and one of our areas of focus is promoting the creation of individual evacuation plans. One of the reasons why the implementation of DIDRR is so slow to occur is that the role of each and every individual is not clear. Also, by thoroughly investigating why more than twice as many persons with disabilities lost their lives in the Great East Japan Earthquake, we now understand that they were isolated within their communities long before the disaster occurred. At that time, more than 80% of them were disconnected from their community and did not use any disability welfare service.

We believe that creating individual evacuation plans for each person with a disability will help to clarify individual roles related to how, with whom and where to evacuate. Moreover, we also hope that increasing interactions and communication between persons with disabilities and other community members will decrease the isolation gap as people begin to grasp how many persons with disabilities are living in the community, where they live and what kind of particular needs they have. If we are not prepared to clarify individual roles in our everyday lives, there is nothing that can be done during an emergency.

1. http://www.preventionweb.net/files/43291\_sendaiframeworkfordrren.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.nippon-foundation.or.jp/en/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.wcdrr.org/sasakawa [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://www.unisdr.org/2005/wcdr/intergover/official-doc/L-docs/Hyogo-framework-for-action-english.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/aboutmajorgroups.html [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 1) women, 2) children and youth, 3) farmers, 4) indigenous people, 5) NGOs, 6) workers and labor unions, 7) local governments, 8) the scientific and technological community and 9) business and industry [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. http://www.wcdrr.org/conference/events/385 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. http://webtv.un.org/search/representative-from-persons-living-with-disabilities-6th-plenary-meeting/4113984493001?term=sendai&languages=&sort=date [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. http://webtv.un.org/search/9th-plenary-meeting-and-closure-of-the-third-world-conference-on-disaster-risk-reduction-sendai-japan-2015/4119307211001?term=sendai&languages=&sort=date [↑](#footnote-ref-9)