



Vulnerability- and resilience-based approaches in response to the Syrian crisis: Implications for women, children and youth with disabilities

At a Glance

In conjunction with the sixth anniversary of the Syrian crisis, the Women's Refugee Commission released a new report on disability inclusion in the humanitarian response.

In a protracted and complex crisis, humanitarian actors continue to look for ways to strengthen protection and assistance. Vulnerability considerations have typically determined the design and implementation of humanitarian programs. However, program models are emerging in the Syria response that focus on a resilience-based approach—emphasizing skills, capacities, strengths, and assets. Since the start of the Syrian emergency, the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) has worked with partners on the ground to promote the inclusion of refugees with disabilities, an estimated 22% of the population,¹ in assistance programs and in decision making processes. Recognizing the increased attention to resilience in the Syria response, the WRC undertook a project to examine how vulnerability and resilience-based approaches are supporting the **protection and empowerment** of Syrian refugee women, children, and youth with disabilities. We conducted an extensive literature review, and examined the results of pilot projects with adolescents and youth in Iraq and Lebanon.

Based on this initial work, the WRC has identified a set of actions that must be taken to ensure that the resilience of diverse populations amongst refugees with disabilities are recognized and fostered in programming.

While the findings and recommendations are drawn from the Syria crisis, we believe they have relevance across other humanitarian settings, and can inform broader discussions on how to build more effective responses that address vulnerability, support resilience, and are fully inclusive of women, children, and youth with disabilities.

The vulnerability and resilience continuum

Vulnerability and resilience can be viewed as a continuum at the individual, household, and community levels [See Diagram 1]. At the vulnerability end of the spectrum, assessments and interventions address the immediate concerns – material or protection-related. At the resilience end of the spectrum, assessments and interventions look at positive coping strategies or capacities. Vulnerability and resilience factors can change over time, within contexts and environments, and according to opportunities or interventions. Hence, resilience-based approaches should support individuals, households, and communities to move along this spectrum by strengthening assets, skills, and capacities to cope, adapt, recover, and transform from the stresses and shocks they experience.

• **Diagram 1. Vulnerability and resilience continuum³** •



Key findings

- Most organizations engaged in the Syrian crisis consider **persons with disabilities as a homogeneous “at-risk” group** for prioritization of services or assistance. Intersecting vulnerability factors, such as age and gender, are not often analyzed within this group. This approach **fails to effectively identify those most in need within the population of persons with disabilities.**
- **Protection assessments assume negative capacity of persons with disabilities.** There is rarely any analysis of what resources, skills, and assets people possess that are protective.
- **There is a notable lack of literature, vulnerability- or resilience-based, that focuses on youth as a specific age cohort,** reflecting a gap in the sector’s awareness, and understanding of their risks and capacities.
- WRC and partners’ pilot projects suggest that **strengths- and asset-based approaches may be useful programming vehicles to strengthen the resilience of women, children, and youth with disabilities.** These projects demonstrate that it is possible within the same continuum that incorporates and addresses vulnerability to also identify and strengthen resilience traits such as skills, capacities, and protection strategies. In doing so, these programs not only mitigate protection risks, but also facilitate an individual to move further along the vulnerability-resilience spectrum.

Recommendations

Shifting the understanding of persons with disabilities from uniformly vulnerable to individuals with varied skills, capacities, and assets, is critical to ensuring that they are included in resilience-focused programming.

All operational humanitarian organizations:

- Analyze age, gender, and diversity of affected populations systematically throughout the program cycle to understand and address the specific needs and capacities of the different segments of marginalized groups, ensuring equal access to assistance.

Read the full report here: www.wrc.ms/resilience-syrian-crisis

¹ Handicap International & HelpAge International, *Hidden victims of the Syrian crisis: Disabled, injured and older refugees*, 2014. <http://www.helpage.org/download/537207495fe87>

² Population Council, *Building Assets Toolkit: Developing Positive Benchmarks for Adolescent Girls*, July 2015. <http://www.popcouncil.org/research/building-assets-toolkit-developing-positive-benchmarks-for-adolescent-girls>; WRC, *I’m Here: Adolescent Girls in Emergencies*, October 2014. <https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/populations/adolescent-girls/research-and-resources/1078-i-m-here-report-final-pdf>; WRC, *Cohort Livelihoods and Risk Analysis (CLARA)*, June 2016. <https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/issues/livelihoods/research-and-resources/1231-clara-tool>; WRC, *Tools to Assess and Mitigate GBV Among Urban Refugees*, May 2015. <https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/gbv/resources/1353-urban-gbv-tools>; WRC, *“I See That It Is Possible,” GBV Toolkit*, June 2015. https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/?option=com_zdocs&view=document&id=1173.

³ Created based on Table 2: Defining vulnerability in a crisis context—findings of UNGD e-discussions in ODI/UNDP, *Towards a Resilience-based Response to the Syrian refugee Crisis: A Critical Review of Vulnerability Criteria and Frameworks*, May 2014, p. 10. <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ODI%20Resilience%20Working%20Paper%20web.pdf>.

- Identify both internal (personal) and external (environmental) resilience factors among marginalized groups as entry points for more inclusive programming.
- Pilot, document, and share learning on resilience-based approaches applied at the household and individual levels for women, children, and youth with disabilities - this may include developing and / or adapting existing guidance from available resiliency tools.²
- Design programs focused on reducing vulnerability factors and strengthening resilience factors with the aim of moving targeted participants forward on the vulnerability – resilience continuum.

Cash actors:

- Evaluate alternative approaches to assessing socioeconomic vulnerability, which integrates capacities and positive coping strategies and their impact on households with women, children, and youth with disabilities.
- Pilot cash-based interventions that support beneficiaries transition into more sustainable livelihoods, strengthening resilience at the individual and household levels.

Protection & disability actors:

- Identify and analyze protection risks across age, gender, and diversity groups by identifying intersecting factors that make individuals with disabilities vulnerable to specific protection concerns, and develop strategies to address or mitigate those factors.
- Include an analysis of positive coping and self-protection strategies employed by individuals, target groups, and their communities.
- Identify factors that enable access, participation, and empowerment for marginalized groups, and how those factors can be strengthened and supported.

Donors:

- Invest in research and learning that recognizes and strengthens the protection and resilience of marginalized groups.
- Support the development of tools and interventions that move beyond the identification of risks, needs, and concerns, to also include capacities, protection strategies, and resiliency traits of individuals, households, and communities.