

Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator Ramesh Rajasingham: Opening Remarks to the HNPW Session on “Moving towards more inclusive humanitarian action: defining the problem and objectives”

Online, 20 April 2021

Distinguished guests, colleagues, ladies, friends gentlemen, thank you so much for joining us for this framing meeting.

As you know, the corona crisis has been traumatic mainly for the most vulnerable people. They are suffering enormously from the impact of the COVID crisis.

It has heightened the need to become much more inclusive, not only for the aid community but for the world. A lot of what we paid lip service to before, is now an imperative, we have to do it.

For me, it's a real pleasure for me to discuss inclusion.

It's been five years since the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul that called on us to move away from a “one size fits all” approach to humanitarian action, and to provide assistance and protection appropriate to the situation and needs of the most affected people.

It's also been five years since the launch of the [Charter on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities](#) and the [Inclusion Charter](#).

Since then, we have come a long way in tailoring our response to meet the needs of particularly women, and persons with disabilities.

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee has endorsed several key documents to guide the humanitarian community on the empowerment of women and other gender issues.

The momentum around the inclusion of persons with disabilities has grown with several key milestones, such as the Global Disability Summit in 2018 and the launch of the [IASC Guidelines on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action](#) in 2019.

Inclusion is increasingly being considered for us in humanitarian policy and programming. There has been an increase in inclusion adviser posts and inclusion-specialized staff deployed to humanitarian responses. In fact, today there is no other way than to go down this path.

Policy discussions, strategies, commitments, and initiatives are taking place in humanitarian entities, designed to make humanitarian action more inclusive for older persons, young people and other diverse groups.

In OCHA for example, we consider that inclusion must start at the level of needs assessments. We have worked over the last years to enhance the way humanitarian needs assessments, and subsequently the response analysis and the response plans, focus on the priorities identified by the affected people themselves, and take into consideration diversities and existing new vulnerabilities.

However, more needs to be done. We need to make sure that we consider also intersecting aspects of vulnerability in our actions.

For example, an older woman who is blind will have different needs and capacities than an adolescent for example who is gay. It is the combination of these diversities that may exacerbate pre-existing vulnerability in specific ways and create new ones especially in crises and displacement situations.

The recent [UN Global Report on Ageism](#) highlights how stereotypes, negative feelings towards and discrimination against people based on their age, especially older and widowed women, interact with other biases such as ableism, sexism and racism. And in fact, if anything, this has become even more a problem during the COVID crisis.

So far our approaches have focused largely on specific aspects of diversities, such as gender, disabilities or racism instead of looking at a complete picture of an individual or a community in our response efforts.

A [recent report](#) by the NGO, Humanity and Inclusion underlines this point by unpacking how various aspects of an individual must be considered in order to design effective humanitarian response.

In a few minutes you will hear from ODI's Humanitarian Policy Group about [the state of play on inclusion and exclusion in humanitarian action](#). They found that by dividing our response based on disability, gender and age, our approach to vulnerability has encouraged a fragmentation of inclusion or the opposite effect. ODI also reports that while specific technical approaches to inclusion are necessary, they are simply not enough.

Over the next three weeks, in the 15 sessions of the Inclusion Priority Topic, we'll have several opportunities to explore the best possible ways to become more inclusive.

We expect that 235 million people around the world will need humanitarian assistance and protection this year – that's 1 in 33 people worldwide. A significant increase from last year, which was already the highest figure in decades.

The Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week is an opportunity to shape this debate, policy and practice on inclusion.

And this is particularly important at a time of soaring humanitarian needs, propelled by conflict, climate change and the pandemic. And even more importantly, the economic impact of the pandemic. These factors have affected the places where we work, they compounded risks, they exacerbated inequalities and vulnerability, as I mentioned, and they have also undermined progress across the globe in implementing the SDGs.

But we cannot just focus on people's vulnerability. People have the right to control their fate, to be treated equally and not be discriminated against. The 2030 Agenda's commitment to leave no one behind and reach the furthest behind is grounded in these principles of human rights.

There are many obstacles to reducing inequalities. However, we must commit to do five things. This, of course, should not affect the more specific ongoing work, such as that on gender and persons with disabilities.

- First, we must ensure inclusion is firmly rooted in the Humanitarian Principles of humanity and impartiality, so that we reach people most affected by crises through inclusive needs assessments and more disaggregated data.
- Second, we must ensure individuals in all their diversities have equal access to services and assistance.
- Third, we have to interpret inclusion not only as protection or accountability. While we need to be inclusive in all aspects of humanitarian action, tailored approaches to the various diversities are also required.
- Fourth, listen to the voices of those who too often are marginalized in societies and communities, recognizing and harnessing their capacities. It's very important.
- Fifthly and finally, we have to recognize that discriminations and inequalities do exist in many societies at the structural level well before the onset of humanitarian crises, for example due to a lack of adequate infrastructure. We must, therefore, make sure that humanitarian, development and in some cases also peace actors work hand in hand right from the outset and not simply in terms of exchanging information.

As I wish you interesting discussions over the coming weeks, I would like to leave you with an important statistic. That teams that are gender, age and ethnically diverse make better decisions up to 87 per cent of the time!¹ So it's a no brainer.

¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/eriklarson/2017/09/21/new-research-diversity-inclusion-better-decision-making-at-work/>, quoted by <https://globaldiversitypractice.com/what-is-diversity-inclusion/>

Dominik, thank you very much for this opportunity