



Introduction

In December 2020, the International Disability Alliance (IDA) and the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to facilitate and frame their collaboration. To bring to action the commitments expressed in the MoU, both organizations rely on the participation and active role of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations.

This document provides a brief overview on the areas of collaboration defined in the MoU. The goal is to provide information and background required in order for persons with disabilities and their organizations to become prepared to start engaging in future activities. This paper discusses the following points:

1. The goal and objectives of this collaboration: what do we want to achieve?
2. The areas in which the two organizations will work together: what we are planning to do?
3. The role persons with disabilities and their representative organizations can play in various activities: what you can do?
4. Possible achievements for persons with disabilities and their organizations: what you will gain by engaging in this work?
5. Limitations and challenges: what barriers we may face?

We hope this document gives you a clear understanding of this collaboration, as well as some ideas to realize concrete ways to contribute in this joint initiative.

1. The goal and objectives of this collaboration: what do we want to gain?

As the year 2020 closed, it was estimated that 12 million people with disabilities¹ were forcibly displaced by persecution, violence and human rights violations. Many have had to flee violence and conflict, or political persecution. Others faced disasters such as earthquake, cyclone, droughts or floods. Some of these people have had to leave their home country and become asylum seekers and refugees. Other people moved to another area in the country, becoming “internally displaced people”. Both these groups are often identified as “forcibly displaced” people.

Then, there are other groups who may not have any nationality. These groups are often called stateless persons. In addition, refugees who decide to go back to their home countries are called returnees, and who may also need support.

To protect and support all these groups, the United Nations established a specific agency called the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). All the mentioned groups and people listed above are referred to as “persons of concern to UNHCR”.

¹ This estimate results from applying the 15% global estimate on disability (WHO World report on disability, 2011) to the almost 80 million forcibly displaced in 2020 ([UNHCR Mid-Year Trends 2020](#)).

Beyond estimates, data on how many of forcibly displaced persons have disabilities is scarce. However, we know that for various reasons, the number of persons with disabilities is higher among this population. For example, armed violence or disasters cause new impairments. Also, because of additional barriers in refugee camps or settlements, people with impairments face more restrictions in accessing fundamental rights such as independent living, mobility, legal capacity, health or education.

As you are aware, IDA's role is to represent persons with disabilities from different regions and with different impairments at the global level. Therefore, a collaboration between UNHCR and IDA is essential to ensure equal protection, inclusion and participation of all persons with disabilities, including those living in situations of forced displacement and statelessness.

For this purpose, the two organizations concluded a Memorandum of Understanding in December 2020 to strengthen and define their collaboration. This MoU is valid until 2024 and is currently in the inception phase.

2. Areas in which the two organizations will work together: what we are planning to do?

IDA and UNHCR are planning to collaborate in four main areas:

A. Mutual capacity-building

We believe that the lack of awareness and knowledge is the root of many shortcomings in inclusion and protection of forcibly displaced persons with disabilities. Therefore, we prioritize investing on mutual capacity-building. The goal is to provide UNHCR staff with the knowledge and understanding that they need to ensure that their decisions, plans, and actions are inclusive of forcibly displaced persons with disabilities and enhances participation opportunities for them. We also aim to provide organisations of persons with disabilities (henceforth known as DPOs) and advocates with disabilities with the knowledge and expertise they need to effectively contribute in global, regional, national or local response to forced displacement and statelessness.

B. Global Refugee Forum

The Global Refugee Forum is a platform where governments, humanitarian actors and the civil society come together every four years to promote refugee rights. The first Forum [happened in 2019](#), and IDA and UNHCR collaborated to promote the rights of refugees with disabilities. IDA and UNHCR are now collaborating to monitor the implementation of existing pledges with a focus on disability inclusion and enhance the number and quality of future pledges related to equal protection, inclusion and participation of refugees with disabilities.

C. Humanitarian Clusters

In order to coordinate response to humanitarian emergencies and bring together different actors, a mechanism has been created at global and national levels known as "Humanitarian Clusters". Different clusters cover different sectors such as protection, access to water, sanitation and hygiene, shelter, etc. Clusters play a key role in humanitarian responses, therefore it is essential to ensure that they are disability-inclusive. UNHCR is a main actor in many clusters and in particular leads the [Global Protection Cluster](#). Therefore, one of the areas of collaboration between the two organizations is that UNHCR supports the effective participation of IDA and IDA members in clusters.

D. Monitoring the Implementation of the CRPD

Article 11 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities (CRPD) mandates Member States to ensure inclusion and protection of persons with disabilities in situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies. Furthermore, statelessness and forcibly displaced persons with disabilities are entitled to human rights and fundamental freedoms articulated in other articles of the CRPD, for example living independently and being included in the community, accessibility, access to health care and education.

IDA and UNHCR will collaborate to ensure that the UN human rights monitoring bodies, in particular the CRPD Committee, have access to firsthand detailed information about human rights situations of statelessness and forcibly displaced persons with disabilities. This would start by collaborating in the development of coordinated submissions on a few States to be shared with the CRPD Committee prior to its review process.

In addition, in 2019 the UN Security Council adopted the Resolution 2475 mandating equal protection, inclusion and participation of persons with disabilities affected by armed conflict. One efficient way to ensure implementation of this resolution is to facilitate people with disabilities living in conflict affected areas to brief the Security Council. IDA and UNHCR are committed to collaborate in arranging such briefings where appropriate.

E. United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy

In 2019, the United Nations adopted its first system-wide strategy mandating all UN agencies to ensure that their policies, programs, facilities, communications and employment opportunities are inclusive of and accessible for persons with disabilities. As a UN agency, UNHCR has taken firm steps since then to implement the strategy. Under the 2020 MOU, IDA and UNHCR are collaborating to ensure efficient implementation of the strategy in different levels and by different divisions of the UNHCR. This collaboration would lead to improving the accessibility of UNHCR venues, facilities and communications; facilitating enhanced participation and the active role for persons with disabilities in UNHCR policy-making, planning and implementation; and strengthened opportunities for employment within UNHCR.

3. The role persons with disabilities and their representative organizations can play in various activities: what you can do?

All the above-explained goals will not be achievable without active participation of DPOs, in particular national and local DPOs. To start the implementation of this collaboration, IDA and UNHCR are selecting 3 countries to focus and pilot the project in 2021.

There are many potential opportunities for engagement and participation for DPOs in this collaboration.

Some examples may include:

- Participating in consultations in providing training and raising awareness about disability inclusion for UNHCR staff;
- Providing advice and feedback on measures planned or taken to enhance inclusion and participation of forcibly displaced persons with disabilities;
- Verifying accessibility of UNHCR facilities, equipment, communication and programs;
- Participation in humanitarian coordination mechanisms and events; and

- Supporting capacity-building and skills development of forcibly displaced persons with disabilities in order to play active role in their communities.

4. Possible achievements for persons with disabilities and their organizations: what you will gain by engaging in this work?

If you are person with a disability or represent a DPO specifically focusing on rights and inclusion of persons of concern with disabilities, engaging in the IDA-UNHCR collaboration would provide you with the opportunity to develop your work and establish strategic partnerships with UNHCR offices and other humanitarian actors.

If you are representing a mainstream DPO, this would be a unique opportunity to include forcibly displaced persons with disabilities in your plans and activities. In addition to supporting one of the most marginalized groups of persons with disabilities, this would open new collaboration paths for engaging with UN agencies and other international and national humanitarian actors. The implementation of the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy would require accessibility services and technical advice which DPOs are at best place to provide. Potential learning and working opportunities may also raise upon implementation of the strategy and also in order to support the IDA-UNHCR collaboration at your region/country/area.

5. Limitations and challenges: what barriers we may face?

The main challenge anticipated for this collaboration, in particular during the first year, is related to the limitations caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic. All meetings and activities must happen online, which creates restrictions on the quality and efficiency of participation. IDA and UNHCR have initial resources to ensure the accessibility of the first-contact activities taking place in 2021, but additional resources will need to be mobilized to pursue the collaboration. Also, the global pandemic has impacted funding opportunities for humanitarian action and disability inclusion.

Another challenge is the novelty of dialogue and collaboration between humanitarians and DPOs in many contexts. Humanitarian organizations in general are not usual partners for many DPOs so both sides may need some support and time to adjust the communication and develop mutual trust and understanding.

Finally, competing priorities may hinder fast and efficient implementation of this collaboration. DPOs face financial and logistic restrictions and receive lots of advice and support requests from local civil society, UN agencies and other actors. This makes prioritization difficult for many DPOs. On the other side, due to ongoing crisis leading to displacement and scarce resources including limited understanding on disability inclusion, UNHCR teams may face challenges in giving required priority to addressing disability inclusion.

For further information

- To learn more about UNHCR work with persons with disabilities, please visit [UNHCR - Persons with Disabilities](#).
- To learn more about IDA work on inclusive humanitarian action and disaster risk reduction, please visit [Inclusive Humanitarian Action and Disaster Risk Reduction | International Disability Alliance](#).
- If you have any questions or want to get involved more, please contact:

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