

Hellenic Observatory Research Calls Programme

**Inclusion of People with Disabilities in Disaster Risk
Management after the COVID-19 pandemic:
an exploratory study in the Greek context**

Policy Brief

**Emmanouil Pikoulis, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens
Ioannis Vardakastanis, Advisor, President of National Confederation of
Disabled People- Greece (NCDP)**

**Evika Karamagioli, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens
Evangellia Kallimani, Institute of National Confederation of Persons with
Disabilities and Chronic Diseases (IN-ESAmA)**

Eleni – Panagiota Stoupa, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

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Inclusion of People with Disabilities in Disaster Risk Management after the COVID-19 pandemic: an exploratory study in the Greek context

Authors:

Emmanouil Pikoulis, Principal Investigator

Ioannis Vardakastanis, Advisor of the study

Evika Karamagioli, Researcher

Evangellia Kallimani, Researcher

Eleni – Panagiota Stoupa, Researcher

Executive Summary

This policy brief aims to provide realistic policy recommendations on how to improve the inclusion of people with disabilities/chronic conditions in disaster preparedness, management, and recovery. The policy brief builds upon the findings of the first survey undertaken in the aftermath of the pandemic and recent natural disasters in Greece, focusing on disability-inclusive approaches. The findings highlight three main pillars of policy recommendations: implementing a disability mainstreaming approach within the risk prevention and reduction framework, enhancing the accessibility and usability of services, and increasing the visibility of individuals with disabilities.

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Introduction

Everyone is impacted by disasters, but those who are more vulnerable are impacted the most. People with disabilities and chronic diseases are particularly exposed to the effects of disasters, since they are often invisible, neglected, and poorly understood. In the context of "polycrisis", those with disabilities consistently suffer more detrimental consequences from disasters. During the pandemic people with disabilities and chronic diseases faced numerous obstacles, exacerbating pre-existing disparities which limited their capacity to fully engage in society. The conventional risk-management strategy is inadequate in the face of ongoing disasters, and it seems more important than ever to develop a robust, disability-inclusive model of disaster risk management. However, in order to incorporate disability considerations into mainstream activities, it is crucial for governments and organizations to have accurate data that allows them to monitor individuals with disabilities before, during, and after disasters. The lack of official data during the pandemic coupled with the restricted digital capabilities of public agencies, became evident. A comprehensive understanding of the pandemic's effects on marginalized communities, notably people with disabilities, was further hindered by the reliance on closed care facilities globally for disability data, which focused on chronic diseases. This study is an attempt to offer insight into the Greek framework and update pertinent facts.

The results of our study highlighted the difficulties that individuals with disabilities encountered following the COVID-19 pandemic, which coincided with an extraordinary number of natural disasters in Greece. In addition to the respondents' perspectives and experiences, the findings underpinned the need for more inclusive policies at national level. Despite the multiple positive steps, the integration of individuals with disabilities remains uneven. Because of this, comprehensive horizontal policies for various vulnerabilities during catastrophes are necessary, co-created and co-designed with individuals with disabilities or chronic illnesses, caregivers, families, and customized aids. Below, we present several policy recommendations derived from the findings and the academic discourse, which center on three main pillars: incorporating the disability mainstreaming approach into the framework for risk prevention and disaster reduction, improving accessibility and usability of services, as well as increasing the visibility of people with disabilities.

Policy Recommendations

Disability mainstreaming approach in the risk prevention and reduction framework

- Inclusion of a participatory approach method into the framework of risk prevention and disaster reduction that prioritizes recommendations from the community of people with disabilities and encourages their involvement in the creation, execution, and assessment of policies, action plans, and programs.
- Inclusion of legal frameworks that protect the rights of people with disabilities and chronic illnesses, taking into consideration their special characteristics as a major factor in vulnerability, especially before, during, and following disasters.

Improving accessibility and usability of services

- Co-design of inclusive warning systems with people with disabilities and improve their accessibility to infrastructures (field hospitals, shelters, refuge areas, healthcare services, rehabilitation, buildings etc).
- Modification of legislations, by-laws, and operational procedures to comply with international standards, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to ensure universal accessibility for all people, offered in versions and formats that are understandable to different disability groups.
- Promotion of a person-centred emergency preparedness approach in all hazards by developing tailored-made disaster management plan for each citizen with disabilities or chronic conditions.
- Establishment of a central registry for all individuals with chronic illnesses or impairments, offering trustworthy information and conclusions.

Enhancing the visibility of people with disabilities

- Encourage the involvement of organizations that support people with disabilities, people living with chronic diseases, and their families in the decision-making procedures.
- Provision of education and training to members of the disabled community as well as to other actors, services, organizations, and persons participating in the policy-making process ensuring that no one is left behind. Participation of individuals with disabilities, including those suffering from chronic illnesses, in simulation exercises focused on disaster planning, management, and recovery should be also encouraged.
- Encourage the deinstitutionalization of disabled people, as those residing in institutions are often more susceptible to disasters.
- Produce and/or provide information and awareness-raising campaigns that are easy to use and readily available to individuals with disabilities.

Methodology

For our research, a mixed methodology was used (scoping review, two focus groups, online survey) to fully comprehend the current situation and collect information from impacted areas all over Greece. The research team conducted a scoping review to identify the existing knowledge base and gaps in the available information regarding the intersection of COVID-19, natural disasters, and people with disabilities. From the chosen papers a thematic analysis was implemented. The themes emerged were discussed in two participatory focus groups with representatives from the National Organization for Public Health, the National Confederation of Persons with Disabilities and Chronic Diseases (NCPD), members of the disability movement, health associations, government officials, and people with disabilities and chronic diseases, along with suggestions and recommendations regarding the online questionnaire. Upon these discussions the first nationwide online survey was implemented regarding disaster risk perceptions and reduction efforts, determining what procedures are currently in use in the field about including people with disabilities in disaster risk management and preparedness, as well as the perceived policies put into place during the pandemic that were directed at such people.

Research Results:

The findings of our research are aligned with other similar research all over the world, showing that the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters had in fact a substantial impact on people with disabilities. According to our data, a significant number of participants believe that people with disabilities and chronic illnesses, as well as their families, face more difficulties when it comes to disasters and emergencies. Over 65% of the participants feel vulnerable against potential disasters in their communities, since emergency facilities lack the necessary physical accessibility, while warning and

evacuation plans frequently overlook their special needs, such as those relating to mobility, hearing, or vision impairments.

Our research highlights that COVID-19 significantly affected medical treatment and services in Greece, especially for people with disabilities. The pandemic interrupted key services for this community, according to 40.8% of respondents who reported a serious impact on the receiving services and support. Nearly half of the respondents (47.5%) highlighted the restricted and meager access to medical care during the lockdown. From the mandated government efforts, 40% of participants identified the attempt to minimize infection as the most important.

Digital services developed during the COVID-19 pandemic were utilized by an overwhelming majority of respondents (88.5%) facilitating their access to public services. Nevertheless, according to our findings the main obstruction to their use was the difficulties in accessing them. Following research's data, people with disabilities were willing to embrace and use of new technological solutions to facilitate their access to public services, especially during difficult times, as they did with the digital services introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic among respondents with disabilities in the Greek context.

The evaluation of information's quality during the pandemic is in accord with other academic research articles. Mass media and internet are the main sources of information for most respondents regarding COVID-19 and emergencies. In the evaluation of COVID-19 information's clarity the majority characterized it as "clear", with an important number of respondents highlighting some lacks in clarity. Regarding the general level of satisfaction with the information, different opinions were voiced. Although a sizeable percentage of respondents expressed discontent, others took a neutral view about the information they were given. A significant proportion of research participants -around two thirds- were not aware of the survey's provisions for individuals with disabilities. This issue has been acknowledged in prior publications regarding the complex and unreliable nature of information transmission. Furthermore, only a small number of participants have registered in their respective municipalities as a proactive step of disaster preparedness, according to nearly 80% (294 participants) of the disaster-affected participants. This finding is consistent with international literature regarding incomplete or missing information about the preparation of disabled population during crisis situations.

Furthermore, respondents underpinned their interest in attending training sessions and seminars on emergency preparedness and handicap rights. The Greek government's "112" early warning system was widely regarded as beneficial. Studies have revealed that there is no inverse correlation between handicap status and disaster preparedness, suggests that individuals with disabilities are willing to improve their knowledge and preparedness in the event of a disaster as well as that they might have higher percentage

of resilience to handle crises because they frequently get through physical barriers and hurdles.