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## **Older people in disasters and humanitarian crises: guidelines for best practice**

HelpAge International has published guidelines to assist agencies working with older people in disasters and humanitarian crises. The guidelines suggest practical ways to meet older people's needs and to recognise their potential in emergency situations.

Even before disaster strikes, many older persons in developing countries are poor and marginalised. In humanitarian crises, they form a significant proportion of those at risk, particularly older women. Yet they are often ignored, left behind or isolated in dangerous and life-threatening situations.

Most aid agencies recognise older people as a vulnerable group in emergencies but rarely assign them the priority given, for example, to children. Humanitarian organisations frequently lack the particular expertise and capacity to address older persons' needs, which can result in discrimination and unnecessary hardship for these persons.

The guidelines were developed by HelpAge International, based on research conducted with support from the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) and the United Nations' High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). The research drew on HelpAge International's 20 years' experience of working in humanitarian emergencies and on four field studies conducted in Bangladesh, Bosnia, the Dominican Republic and Rwanda.

The guidelines suggest ways to integrate elders' needs into agencies' emergency response. Simple changes in practice and attitudes can make the difference between death and survival. The guidelines cover such issues as:

- Basic needs for shelter and appropriate food.
- Accessible services, including health care and psychosocial support.
- Protection from abuse.
- Ways to consult older people.
- How to involve them in decisions about the kind of assistance they need.

Many older persons find themselves with increased responsibility in emergencies. If they are not weakened by illness and neglect, they are often as much givers as receivers of care. They support their families, mobilise resources and care for children, including orphans and other dependents. Their responsibilities, and the knowledge and skills which they bring, should be recognised and built upon, the guidelines urge.

When the immediate crisis is past, many older persons are able and often eager to join in rebuilding their livelihoods and communities. The guidelines highlight the need for recovery and rehabilitation programmes to support them, by including them in skills training, access to credit and support for income generation.

The research findings and the guidelines drew on views expressed by older persons as well as community leaders, people in other age groups and aid workers. The message, which applies equally to more recent emergencies – for example, in Mozambique, Kosovo and Orissa, India, is summed up in the guidelines:

- To be seen, heard and understood.
- To have equal access to essential support services.
- To have their potential and contributions recognised, valued and supported.

*Older people in disasters and humanitarian crises: guidelines for best practice* is available in English, French, Portuguese and Spanish.

The full document is posted at {HYPERLINK <http://www.helpage.org>} [www.helpage.org](http://www.helpage.org)

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