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Post-election violence and disabled people in Kenya; issues for reflection and action

Abstract

[Excerpt] The media has reported widely on the fate of victims of the post-election violence and relief agencies have performed admirably in building temporary camps where displaced people can receive food, water, shelter and security. However, one group has noticeably received little media coverage and has often been unable to access the aid provided; Kenya's disabled people.

Keywords

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Post-election violence and disabled people in Kenya; issues for reflection and action

By Phitalis Were Masakhwe, 24 January 2008

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Phitalis Were Masakhwe

Some time back I wrote about the Rwandan Genocide and its impact on disabled people; the untold story. It never occurred to me that one day I would be writing a similar story about disabled people in Kenya.

The flawed presidential election and the ensuing violence throughout Kenya have rattled the peace and tranquility that the country has long known. The reasons for the current situation are varied, politics, long-standing ethnic differences, and historical injustices and imbalances, particularly the issue of access to and distribution of resources and opportunities.

However, whatever the reasons that got us here, the affect of the violence has been consistent. Widespread violence and killing, looting and destruction of property, and over 250,000 people forced from their homes into Internally Displaced Persons camps across Kenya.

The media has reported widely on the fate of victims of the post-election violence and relief agencies have performed admirably in building temporary camps where displaced people can receive food, water, shelter and security. However, one group has noticeably received little media coverage and has often been unable to access the aid provided; Kenya's disabled people.



Media coverage, admittedly, has not ignored the plight of disabled people during this period. Who can forget the pictures of the empty wheelchair in the Church burnt down in Eldoret? Yet, in the main disabled people and the results of violence against them during the current crisis has gone unseen and unheard. How many more reports, articles or pictures can you think of? Myself, not many,

Disabled people have also gone unrecognized in many of the Internally Displaced Persons camps. Over the past few weeks I have visited various camps and witnessed first hand the difficult conditions that disabled people are facing. They are often unable to access food and water as they are not physically strong enough to queue or even at times push through the crowds to get supplies.

Many disabled people had to abandon their wheelchairs and crutches, etc in the flight from their homes and were carried to camps by friends and relatives. They are now confined to sitting in the same spot all day, dependent on friends and family to feed and clothe them. For many, not only have they lost their homes, but also their independence and livelihoods.

Many camps have also failed to recognize that people with hidden disabilities, such as diabetes or epilepsy, have urgent health care needs. I have met parents whose disabled children have died because they cannot access the simple health care which their lives depend on. This is not to criticize the many agencies that have done an incredible job under the circumstances, but I believe it is important to highlight the fact that disabled people often struggle within these camps.

Yet, in many ways disabled people who made it to the camps are the lucky ones. I have met people who had to leave their disabled relatives and friends at home or on the road when they fled as they were simply unable to carry them. What has happened to them? I fear that this will forever remain an untold story.

We must also not forget the number of people who will become disabled as a result of the violence sweeping across Kenya. The link between conflict, emergency situations and disability is not disputed. Conflict creates disabled people through increased rates of injury, lack of medical care and disruption of medical health care services. Where is the commitment from the Government and relief agencies to tackle this imminent problem?

This is not, however, solely a Kenyan problem. Persons with disabilities are always disproportionately affected by disasters and conflict. Disabled people suffer most from the loss of assistive devices, the disappearance and loss of family members or carers, and from a lack of medication and health care.

Consequently there now exist international laws protecting disabled people. Article 11 of the new UN Treaty on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights and Dignity of Disabled People, for example, requires states to take all necessary measures to “ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk, including situations of armed conflict, humanitarian emergencies and the occurrence natural

disasters.” These laws have to be actively observed and acted upon by all parties to the current crisis in Kenya.

As our leaders struggle to bring an end to the violence and disruption in Kenya we must all start to focus on the plight of disabled people. Disabled people and their families continue to experience problems, such as difficulty in accessing information, food, water and shelter and are likely to be placed in temporary housing not necessarily in line with their wishes. They are also, especially women and children, particularly vulnerable to exploitation and sexual abuse. We must make immediate and long-term plans to tackle these issues.

Now is also the time for us all to learn lessons, to ensure that disabled people never again experience these kinds of problems. The media must report on the disabled people and their stories and should be helped to understand the importance of this issue. Disabled People’s Organisations will also need to work with relief agencies and Government to explain the importance of recognizing and prioritizing the needs of disabled people in emergency situations.

There are many lessons to be learnt. Yet these are important and essential lessons. Kenya must not sit back and allow disabled people to suffer to such an extreme; not now or ever again. Focusing on the plight of disabled people and helping rebuild their lives will play an important part in restoring Kenya to the peaceful, tranquil and caring country that we all know and love. Let’s start now.

The writer, a sociologist has a physical disability. He is a senior Resource Development Advocacy and Campaigns Manager with Leonard Cheshire Disability LCD East & North Africa Regional office based in Nairobi. He has worked and lived in Afghanistan and Sudan. He can be reached at Phitalis@lci-enar.org or mphitalis@yahoo.com